Submission to:

Agriculture Food & Policy Reference Group

By: **Producers Forum**

Background

Producers Forum participants are agricultural producers from all over Australia. In March 2005 the initial participants in the Forum met to discuss our frustration at being denied the choice to grow genetically modified [GM] crops (other than cotton & carnations).

Participants in the Producers Forum are grain and oilseed growers from Western Australia, dried fruit, dairy, grain and beef producers from Victoria, and cotton, grain, cattle, sheep and oilseed growers from New South Wales and Queensland. Many of us are members of state farm associations and commodity organizations.

We are driven by frustration at the attitude towards GM crops of some of the major commodity companies and State Governments in Australia, and believe that Australia is missing out on possibly the most beneficial technical advance the world has ever seen.

Australian farmers have stayed viable by being at the forefront of technology adoption on a very uneven global playing field, and we are now being forced to abstain from possibly the most important technology in our lifetimes.

As other producers have heard about the forum through word of mouth more have begun to participate in the Forum. We expect this trend to continue. The Forum provides producers with access to science-based information, referees with experience in gene technology and a forum in which to discuss GM issues.

Producers Forum is a working title for these producers with a common concern, not an organization.

Agriculture & Technology Adoption

Australian agriculture has a rich history in both applying and developing new technologies. Australian producers' willingness to adopt innovative practices and technologies, together with extensive research and extension services, has enabled them to have a raft of management tools at their disposal to meet production and marketing challenges.

Farmers do not adopt new technologies for their own sake. The technology must satisfy certain criteria such as: meet a production need, be affordable and contribute to the continuing sustainability & viability of their production system.

The farming sector continues to look to science for new technologies that will aid productivity and provide an economic, environmental and social benefit to producers and subsequently to the wider community.

Biotechnology, in the form of genetically modified (GM) crops, is one such technology.

Adoption rates are likely to be improved when those parties who are the most likely users of a technology are kept 'in the loop' during the development phase.

Agriculture & Biotechnology

Major scientific bodies and regulatory authorities around the world have determined that those GM crops that have been approved for commercial release are safe for both human health and the environment. Over one billion acres of GM crops have been sown worldwide. Around the world an average of more than 200,000 hectares of biotech crops are harvested each day.

In countries where farmers have access to GM crops the benefits have been, lower production costs and greater benefit to the environment due to reduced pesticide use, more management choices (e.g. ability to use reduced-till or no-till systems), less soil erosion, reduced rates of development of resistance to chemicals, less fuel use (due to fewer passes), higher yields and hence greater rewards for farmers, their communities and the environment.

Yet in Australia, due to moratoria on the growing of new GM crops by all state governments except Queensland and the Northern Territory, farmers are denied the freedom to choose to use this safe and effective technology that is one of the world's most rapidly adopted agricultural technologies.

In the Australian community there is considerable interest in the environment. However, the majority of Australian farmers have little or no say in the environmental policies being promoted to Governments.

Many of the groups and organizations attempting to represent their members views are often left responding to a small and vocal minority. There are other bodies purporting to represent

‘stakeholders’ in policy development that have no means by which their ‘members’ can influence the organizations own policy development, and/or represent a very small but well funded and hence vocal group of individuals, and/or are promulgating a particular production method as the only ‘sustainable’ one (e.g. ‘organic’ farming, or ‘biological’ farming) and/or have a vested interest in a product or production system which they believe (often wrongly) will benefit from a ban on GM crops and/or have a particularly ‘fundamental’ view of what constitutes a healthy environment and sustainable agricultural production system and who are interested to ensure that only one point of view is put forward.

There are other people whose fear of GM crops has been fuelled by a concerted scare campaign based on misinformation, half-truths and sometimes totally wrong assertions. The organizations promoting this fear of GM crops have generally been aided and abetted by the media who appear to be much more interested in sensationalizing the issue than providing Australian consumers with a serious, balanced, factual coverage of the issues, the experience and the evidence.

The Future & Agricultural Biotechnology

The application of gene technology to crops can result in less soil erosion, less fuel emissions and less herbicide carryover, which provides for healthier groundwater, streams and rivers.

There are potential benefits in GM technology not only from a food quality perspective, but also through rotation benefits allowing different strategies for controlling or putting pressure on weeds, pests and disease. This possible role in rotations is an extremely important crop management strategy.

Many more agronomic developments are likely to emerge from the development of GM crops. It would be disappointing and potentially costly, to miss out on such advancements.

Anything managed badly will produce problems. Many lessons have been learned about herbicide resistance. Currently, the majority of Australian producers manage herbicide resistance effectively. The Canadian experience with herbicide resistant GM canola has been that herbicide resistance has in fact been reduced and the pressure taken off the herbicide glyphosate thus extending its useful life within production systems especially the no-till system.

Farmers are striving to improve the current farming systems especially the no-till system. For example, it is imperative that we move forward with stubble-retention by maximising soil cover. This is another critical step in controlling weeds, pests and diseases in a no till system.

Gene Technology will give a much-needed rest to trifluralin, atrazine, glyphosate and the grass selective herbicides.

Australian agriculture has been facing declining terms of trade, falling productivity relative to our competitors and some of the harshest droughts on record. Yet new technologies that promise lower production costs, higher yields, monumental leaps in environmental gains, enhanced nutritional content of foods and an industry dynamic that could economically power the entire state, are shunned by state governments to appease a politically influential but scientifically bereft 'green' niche.

It is interesting that in Tasmania, where the most stringent restrictions on the introduction of new GM crops apply, there are exceptions made for crops that are economically important in that state e.g. the opium poppy.

If Australian agriculture continues to be denied access to crops that have been developed using gene technology then we will be denied access to all of the benefits that flow from current genetic research and development in all the following areas:

Tolerance to frost, acidity and salinity in a variety of crop and pasture plants

Resistance to rust in cereal crop

Resistance to an array of virus's in crop & pasture plants

Reduced allergen levels in the pollen of new ryegrass varieties

Health benefits from grain products that help lower cholesterol, protect against some cancers and reduce the incidence of heart disease, diabetes and colon cancer.

Nutraceuticals that could provide new opportunities for production or for value adding on the farm rather than further down the production chain.

Bio factories could potentially provide farmers with new high value crops for new markets. Using plants as bio factories to make pharmaceuticals or industrial raw materials offers advantages including improved energy efficiency, and reduced costs and industrial waste. Poppies are commercially grown for their natural ability to produce compounds called alkaloids that are used mainly to produce pharmaceuticals for pain relief. Oilseeds have fatty acids that can already be used in industrial applications. However, there is potential to engineer oilseeds to contain speciality fatty acids that can replace petrochemical products in the production of plastics, adhesive and surface coatings. Candidate crops for "pharming" include corn, canola, lucerne, tobacco, sunflower and cotton. Corn in particular is the most highly considered as it stores well, does not leave seeds in the soil, can be sterile and its biology is well understood.

The Commonwealth government has committed resources to the National Biotechnology Strategy and within it Biotechnology Australia. Biotechnology Australia has researched GM issues and provided useful information to the interested public. However, there is a great

need for Biotechnology Australia's campaigns to counter the constant barrage of mostly ill-informed and poorly researched comment in the media. Much of the anti-GM campaign is ideologically and politically based and is extremely well funded. Producers who are aware of the scientific facts about GM crops cannot hope to inform the public when faced with such well funded, slick campaigning.

While-ever the unscientific and unjustified state moratoria on the introduction of new GM crops are in place the public are likely to be concerned about the safety of the products and the state governments site consumer concern as a justification for the moratoria – a classic catch 22 situation. The Commonwealth must show leadership and deal with the states to procure the removal of the moratoria.

The agricultural sector cannot afford to be prevented from GM crop production.

It is feasible to have two distinct supply chains, however, it can only be when there is a premium for one product over the other and where the premium covers the cost of segregation and there is additional return to the producer.

For a long time, Australia has effectively maintained multiple supply chains when the premium/discount has justified the extra cost of separation. Even for canola we have had two supply chains that have successfully been kept separate – one for canola for oil for human consumption and one for industrial rapeseed. The new product, linola, will also be handled through a separate supply chain.

Marketing

Generally governments have a poor record in their attempts to run marketing systems e.g. NSW grain marketing boards.

In modern complex marketing systems, government's role should be confined to facilitator. Marketing is better left to producers and parties involved in the value chain.

Final Comments

Australian farmers are quickly falling behind their major competitors because new technologies are being denied to them.

Australian canola producers see that there is no premium for the non-GM product, that their major market, Japan, accepts far more GM seed from our Canadian competitors than non-

GM seed Australian. We know from experience with certified seed production that where needed, crops can effectively be buffered from each other. Since GM canola is perfectly safe for the environment and human health and there is no premium for non-GM product there is no good reason to segregate GM from non-GM.

The Australian cotton is a clear case study in the successful adoption, application and continuing development and implementation of gene technology. The economic, environmental and social benefits of the application of biotechnology in the cotton industry are obvious and measurable.

How much longer can Australian farmers remain competitive if unscientific state bans on genetically modified organisms deny farmers access to the benefits the technology can provide? How many more years do we have to wait?

We have a right to grow GM products just as others have a right not to consume them. We feel it is unreasonable for others from a potentially less informed position to be imposing conditions on us.

Recommendations

We recommend that:

1. As a matter of urgency, the federal government works with state governments to end all state moratoria on the introduction of new GM crops.
2. Australian agribusiness demonstrates leadership and comes together to discuss gene technology to ensure a clear path to market for all approved GM products.
3. The government's public awareness campaign engages proactively on the GM issue.