

GENETICALLY MODIFIED CANOLA — CONTAMINATION — CUNDERDIN

Statement

HON LYNN MacLAREN (South Metropolitan) [9.46 pm]: I appreciate the opportunity to make a member's statement tonight because I want to respond to some comments made last week following a question asked by Hon Brian Ellis and some statements that he made to the media following the answer given in the Legislative Council. Members will recall that earlier this month I drew attention to the genetically modified canola contamination incident near Cunderdin. A hailstorm resulted in 100 tonnes of GM canola being knocked to the ground and contaminating the roadside verge and a neighbouring non-GM property. That was the latest in a string of incidents of contamination that I have brought to the attention of this house. In the two years since GM canola has been permitted to be grown in WA, we have seen the contamination of an organic farm, the 15-tonne truck spill near Williams, only 500 metres near a non-GM canola farm, and the Conservation Council of Western Australia citizens science survey found canola growing along the roadside throughout Esperance.

These incidents are likely to be just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to contamination. The chances are that rogue GM canola is already growing along roadsides all over the Wheatbelt and posing a very real contamination threat for non-GM farmers. According to the government's ministerial industry reference group paper, the potential levels of GM contamination in one year alone is estimated to be from 0.83 per cent to 0.93 per cent. That is important because it is predicted to increase exponentially each year that canola is grown and that the GM volunteers are not controlled. Certainly, the farmers to whom I have spoken believe that the level of GM contamination out there is far greater than what has been already documented. They are, quite frankly, scared to raise these concerns because they do not want to damage their relationships with their neighbours. They are also worried that they could lose their markets if they draw attention to the fact that their crops are potentially contaminated. These farmers are right to be concerned because the CBH Group currently requires growers to sign declarations to say that none of their grain in a delivery has genetically modified organisms. Every single farmer has to sign that and any level of contamination is a serious concern for growers. If farmers sign this declaration and GM contamination is found in their grain, they wear the liability. As we have heard time and again, the only potential way in which they can recoup any losses is to sue their neighbour, with no great chance of success. According to the federal government's Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, non-GM farmers have little or no legal recourse against the GM industry for any economic losses caused. Legal advice gives a very slim chance of recourse against the GM company or the GM grower. We know that preparation has been undertaken to ensure the company and/or the farmer concerned is aware that contamination is not accepted.

In question time last Thursday, Hon Brian Ellis and the Minister for Agriculture and Food chose to echo the disinformation of the GM crop industry by attempting to discredit my statement regarding a GM canola spill near Cunderdin. I want to address that disinformation. Fifty hectares of GM canola were sown. Agronomists have estimated that the yield was to be around two tonnes per hectare. It does not take a great mathematician to figure out that would equate to 100 tonnes of canola. That is a reasonable estimate of how much was spilt in the hailstorm. According to the minister's response to Hon Brian Ellis's question —

None of the samples taken from the non-GM grower's property tested positive.

The farmers in question were not happy with the cursory testing undertaken by officers from the Department of Agriculture and Food, who, by the way, stayed on the property for less than one hour. The farmers did their own testing last Sunday. I can report to the house that, using test strips provided by Greenpeace, Mr and Mrs James found 10 positive results for GM canola on the roadside next to their property, and three on their land, only 20 metres into the paddock. Clearly the department's officers did not look hard enough. It is quite disturbing that the government's response to this contamination is to attempt to downplay the level of contamination and to undermine the credibility of my factually correct account of the incident. By attempting to shoot the messenger in this way, the government is merely trying to deflect attention from the very important issue of who is liable for this GM contamination. The fact is that the Barnett-Grylls government allowed the release of GM canola into the state with absolutely no protections in place for the vast majority of growers, who, by the way, remain non-GM growers. GM free is still the choice of the majority of growers in Western Australia. Ninety-five per cent of WA's canola went to Europe last year—a market that has absolutely no tolerance for GM canola. WA's non-GM canola growers currently enjoy premiums of \$40 to \$60 a tonne because of their GM-free status. Minister Redman is risking our markets and our farmers' livelihoods by introducing GM canola with absolutely no safeguards in place. Under the current legislation, the only way a farmer can recoup losses due to GM contamination is by suing his neighbour. This pits farmer against farmer and will destroy the rural communities that we represent. Farmer protection legislation is urgently required to protect non-GM farmers from economic losses if GM contamination occurs. It is unacceptable to shoot the messenger. I chose this opportunity to set the record straight.