

GENETICALLY MODIFIED CROPS - MORATORIUM

**266. Hon BARRY HOUSE to the Minister for Agriculture and Food:**

I refer to the promising results from the first field trial in Corrigin of two wheat varieties with salt tolerance.

- (1) What plans are in place to review the current moratorium on genetically modified crops?
- (2) How can companies such as Grain Biotech Australia Pty Ltd attract the vital funding they need to develop their research goals when there are no guarantees that the moratorium will be lifted?
- (3) What guarantees can the minister give Grain Biotech and others that the state government's stance on GM wheat will not impinge on the significant breakthroughs and future developments of these two new wheat varieties?

**Hon KIM CHANCE replied:**

- (1)-(3) No. The government has no plans to review the moratorium. I will put the moratorium in its proper context. The moratorium is a policy position of government. Obviously, any policy position of the government is open to review at any time. At this stage I have no plans to ask the government to review the situation, but I will get to that later. Primarily it is because there is no reason to review the moratorium. That is one level; namely, it is the government's policy position with which the Australian Labor Party went to the election.

More important than the policy position is the legal position. The Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Act 2003 was essentially the consequence of a report by the Legislative Council Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs, which was probably the best report ever delivered to this house. The key elements on which the report's recommendations and the legislation coincide are that the standing committee called for the establishment of a gatekeeper role for government within the Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Act. Essentially that led to becoming the key function of the Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas act. The significance of that is rather like a sheepman operating a drafting race: the gatekeeper can determine what comes through and what gets barred. That is a very important role. Assuming the gatekeeper role effectively means that whoever is in government at the time and whatever its policy position - no government will adopt an open-door policy to GM technology, at least within the next decade - will always have the capacity to control the technology through determining what does and what does not come in, and that is needed. That is more important than the policy position itself. The legal position occupies a priority position. This becomes important in GM technology and its application to crops other than crops of the brassica species. One of the difficulties for genetic modification in Western Australia is that the first crop presented was canola, a brassica crop. The capacity for brassica crops to extend their genes over 3 000 metres and more is high. However, the capacity for pulse and cereal crops to extend their genes is limited to millimetres, not kilometres. That makes a huge difference to whether we can control the technology and, therefore, whether we can adopt GM technology side-by-side, in effect, with non-GM technology without impeding the choices of the non-GM grower. A key issue, in other words, is whether one person's exercise of freedom will impede the exercise of freedom by another.

How can Grain Biotech Australia attract funding with the existence of the moratorium? My answer - this is why I went to some length in answering the first part of the question - is that if people intelligently assess the legal and policy position of government, and put that alongside the factual issues that determine whether a cereal or pulse crop will or might be commercialised in the future as a GM construct, I do not think they would see the moratorium as an issue. Let me get down to the nitty-gritty of that. What GBA and the Grains Research and Development Corporation, which funded GBA, have achieved in the Corrigin trials is a tiny glimpse of the future. It is a very small-scale trial. It did not yield particularly well, but it yielded 23 per cent better than a standard construct. The wheat variety that was used -

**Hon Paul Llewellyn** interjected.

**Hon KIM CHANCE:** Yes, it was 23 per cent higher seed weight; however, that is effectively yield. The wheat that was used was a combination of two common Department of Agriculture and Food-bred standard lines, with an insert of another species, the name of which I cannot pronounce. I do not think it will affect the funding of GBA at all. Having got this far, and if everything goes well, it will be probably be three to five years before it can commercialise a line. Even within the legal limits that are imposed by the existing commonwealth legislation, a commercial line must exist before an application can be made to the Gene Technology Regulator in Canberra. The issue of the state's involvement might then become important, but it will be some years before the state's position actually has any influence over what GBA wants to do.

What guarantees can I give that our position will not impede the development? I do not think I can give any. All I can do is encourage people to continue with the trials. The government supports the trials. I have already indicated that in the event that GBA or anyone else came to the government with an application to go into a larger-scale trial of either a cereal or a pulse crop - which would require the state's consent - I would receive that application favourably.

I think it will be some time before the existence of a moratorium - which in any case expires in 2009 - will be an issue for GBA.