

*Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs — Forty-ninth Report —
“Mechanisms for compensation for economic loss to farmers in Western Australia
caused by contamination by genetically modified material” — Motion*

Resumed from 10 April on the following motion moved by Hon Matthew Swinbourn —

That the report be noted.

Hon DIANE EVERS: It seems like it has been some time since I spoke on this. I am quite pleased that this inquiry occurred. It is a good step to be asking whether this is an issue that we need to do something about. I am not very happy with the outcome, but it is a step. It is a step that we will not be the only ones looking at. Earlier this week, another legal case was decided in Canada, in which a couple was awarded \$2 billion because of the cancers they contracted from using glyphosate. I think this is the third one this year of mega millions of dollars—in this case \$2 billion—against Monsanto, which is now owned by the German company Bayer. It will be interesting to see how that plays out. I am sure that this case will be appealed. We have to take note here that around the world more and more legal cases are being brought to trial on the issue of glyphosate.

Glyphosate and genetically modified organisms are not the same thing, but we know that we use considerably more glyphosate when we are growing such crops as Roundup Ready canola. This inquiry raised the issue that genetically modified crops have had an impact on some farmers. Apparently, there was not enough information, because we have seen only one court case based on genetically modified crops. However, this will be happening more and more, unless we find that people are growing less of the GM crops. The reluctance I have is with GM canola, which survives through the process of being sprayed with glyphosate. This practice was brought on when Monsanto found that its patent for glyphosate was running out. It needed to ensure that it maintained strong sales, and this coincided beautifully with finding some plants that had become glyphosate resistant. Monsanto made use of this to make the canola glyphosate resistant. It all sounds well and good. This is a weed control mechanism that many farmers appreciate, because weed control is one of the big issues facing our farms. In maximising their production, they need to minimise any competing plants. At least, that is how the theory goes. This has increased the use of glyphosate.

As far as I know, none of the three cases were related to growing Roundup Ready canola, but of the 1 000 or more that are in train to go to court, I would not doubt that there are more than a few. This raises the question about genetic engineering and genetic modification of plants. This is one of the earlier GMOs. Since then so many others have come up. Some have entered Australia, and are being tested for production. Genetically modified cotton creates its own toxin within the plant to fend off a particular insect. These things come and go. We know that in the USA they are doing soybeans, potatoes and, I think, tomatoes and papaya. Trials of safflower and a few other things are happening in Australia as well. In addition to these genetically modified crops, other genetic engineering is not of the same sort, where part of one organism is inserted into the DNA of another. The technology is expanding so fast. I cannot say that it will all be bad, but I also would not find anybody here who would say that it will all be just fine. We do not know. We change things slowly—step by step.

Unfortunately, this step has been changed, and it may be some time before we actually realise whether the change in the DNA in genetically modified crops is affecting our population. We know that our population is suffering numerous health problems that our parents' and grandparents' generations did not have so many issues with. We have not yet related those back to the specific causes. Now, with glyphosate, we have done that. It has been determined to be a cancer-causing chemical, and that has now been proved in court. The same thing happened with cigarettes, over time. We took some time to realise that they were actually causing cancer in our lungs. I think that was known from the 1950s, but it was not until the 1980s that it was proven in court and something was done about it. This is something that will be with us for some time. We will continue to experience health issues related to the chemicals that we use and the genetically modified food that we eat. It is a part of our diet. We would have to work pretty hard to make sure that we are not getting any of it, because if we are buying any package or processed food, they very likely carry soy or corn products, and we may be getting some of that GM material.

This inquiry was based on the farmers, and the issues of contamination across farms. The contamination that we face in our own bodies may become the subject of another inquiry at some point. I think there will be another rally tomorrow, and I presented a petition in here some time ago looking at the potential of banning the use of glyphosate. A large group of people believe this should happen, and it will face us somewhere down the track. It is a liability issue. If we go on allowing it past the point of knowing that it is actually causing damage, maybe one day the state will actually be liable for some of this, because we made the decision to allow those crops to be grown and to allow the heavy use of the chemical on our farms, gardens, reserves and everywhere else. It could come back to bite us.

This issue does not require an all-or-nothing response. This inquiry into the contamination of GM across the boundaries of farms raised the issue of other problems between farmers. We like to say that those problems can be worked out over the fence and that everything will be fine, but we all know that not all farmers get along with each

other or their neighbour. It would be nice to have something in place, some sort of mechanism, to address those issues between neighbouring farmers so that they do not have to work them out across the fence or in pubs and cafes. It would be nice if they could work together and go through a process similar to that in the Family Court—some sort of arbitration process in which they can present their case and it will be understood. That is what this was asking for, and it is what other countries are looking for as well so that we can work out how this should be done. Addressing these serious concerns over the fence does not always work. It requires the acquiescence of possibly the less popular participants in the court of public opinion. A farmer may give in to the other farmer because they have a higher standing in the community, but that is not a fair and equitable way of managing it.

The problem will only increase. Although many farmers are choosing not to continue with GM canola, they are now looking to go with new technology or gene editing, so some of these issues may spring up again and we will be asked whether we should allow them. Up to this point, we have been going back to Food Standards Australia and New Zealand to make a decision, but FSANZ relies on the material provided by the organisation that is introducing the crop. Given the lack of scientific rigour exhibited by FSANZ to date, it would be naive to think that greater research will occur with new introductions. Even though farmers are getting out of it, in some situations they have found that there is no better productivity. In these situations they have higher seed costs, increased chemical applications and increased pressure to ban glyphosate, and no right to save their seed.

Resolved, on motion by Hon Diane Evers, that consideration of the report be postponed to the next sitting of the Council.