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 21 August on the following motion moved by Hon Matthew Swinbourn —

That the report be noted.

Hon DIANE EVERS: I again rise to speak on this report, "Mechanisms for compensation for economic loss to farmers in Western Australia caused by contamination by genetically modified material", because the issue still exists. I understand what the committee was able to do. It was looking at the petition, as it stood, and specifically at contamination by genetically modified material that may have happened in the past. We need to take a look at what may happen in the future as well. Gene technology has not stopped. The pace of gene technology research is expanding faster and faster every day, and the possibilities are endless. I have to admit that some of these possibilities may make our lives better, easier and healthier. We already use gene technology in some vaccines. There is plenty of gene technology research going on in many other medical procedure areas. Even biocontrol research for some of the problems that we have caused in the environment is looking at gene technology, such as working with algae and other life forms and the use of invasive species of flora or fauna. I am not saying that those are all bad; I am saying that we do not know what the consequences of that will be. A problem when we look at gene technology in this house is that we really should be looking at the precautionary principle. We really should be saying, "Until we know it's safe, let's not do it at all." If we do not know that it is safe, we do not know what the unintended consequences may be. Until we can adapt and find a way to use the precautionary principle on all genetically modified materials being released into the environment, then we cannot be doing it.

I understand that South Australia has just overturned its moratorium. I feel sorry for the farmers there, who have worked very hard to keep GM out of South Australia. They will no longer have that advantage of being a GM-free state, and they will be like us sometime in the future—trying to rid ourselves of the GM material that may infect our crops across the board. One GM material that we currently have is canola. I have noticed there is an awful lot of canola flowering at the moment. Members can see it far and wide if they travel up Albany Highway. I do not know, and have not checked the figures to see, how much of that is GM material, but I do know that it is decreasing. Each year we have fewer people taking it up because it is not showing the returns that they had expected or had been told of in the initial stages; but that is beside the point right now.

I get back to the report about contamination by genetically modified material. We have a problem. The Office of the Gene Technology Regulator can say yay or nay on whether these crops can be introduced into Australia on a commercial basis. From what I understand, the OGTR has numerous employees who often have also worked for the very companies that are applying for the right to introduce these species. If that is not a conflict of interest, I am not sure what is. What we really should be looking at is how the OGTR is formed, how it operates and what its rules are. I think there are five or six other crops—wheat, safflower oil and a couple of other flower species are being looked at as well. If it is not looking at those and giving them the due consideration they require, we really do run the risk of having something come into our environment that in some way harms the environment and the people who choose not to grow GM material.

Many other countries are saying no to GM. A whole new generation of consumers are starting to look at buying good food. They want food with the nutrition that it should have in it, not something that has been grown as a monoculture, in the same place, over and over, with limited resources to get the good nutrients out of the soil. We can grow a crop that has very little nutrient in it compared with one that has grown in good soil with more nutrient. People are starting to say, "We want good food. It doesn't necessarily have to be organic, but we want to know how it is grown and what sorts of chemicals are used on it—pesticides, herbicides and fungicides."

I am probably not the only one in here who has been hearing a lot more on the radio and television and reading in the newspapers about regenerative agriculture. GM is not part of regenerative agriculture because it would not make sense. If a person is trying to grow the best food possible, starting out with a seed that has been modified to withstand increased dosages of chemicals is the exact opposite of where people are going. They are going towards reducing the use of those chemicals. They are looking to have food that has less residues of herbicides, pesticides and fungicides. They want their food to have the best nutrition possible in it. People will buy a $5 coffee but will baulk at the idea of buying a $2 cauliflower—it just does not make sense. Our youth are figuring this out. They are the ones who are realising that nutrition comes in good food. We will be shown up by them. We will be the ones who suffer the diseases of poor nutrition and poor food consumption.

Food Standards Australia New Zealand approves foodstuffs that come into the country. When applications are made for items that may have GM material in them—we can now pretty much guess that if we are buying anything from the US that has any corn or soy products in it, we are getting GM material in that—these things can come into the country. FSANZ looks at the research, which is produced by the company that wants to introduce it, and the research just happens to say that everything is fine. Do not worry about this! There is nothing to see here! The

food is fine! Then FSANZ says, "See, they've done the research. It's okay." But, again, that is not good enough. We need to have peer-reviewed papers on all the research that is done on the food that we put into our bodies. It just makes sense. It may be too soon to get the link and prove the correlation between GM foods and our own personal health. The idea that cigarettes cause cancer was first raised in the 1940s or 1950s, but the first court case was not won, I think, until the 1980s. This has been around since 1990, so maybe we are coming up for that. It was a bit of a surprise to everyone when Monsanto, which is now Bayer—Monsanto sold glyphosate to Bayer—was being hit with lawsuit after lawsuit about glyphosate. Surprise! No, I do not think it was a surprise. I think it knew it was coming. I would like to see all the negotiations that went on in the transfer of ownership. These lawsuits had been coming along, because people knew that glyphosate was dangerous to some people. There were claims such as "It's fine; you can drink this stuff." Hopefully, nobody believed that. But it is about the fact that it could get away with saying it, and then say that it was going to put out canola crops that are tolerant to glyphosate for up to six weeks. We are spraying the plants even after they are living. But that is fine; there is no residue. We have heard that it is fine and it breaks down and it should not be a problem. It is just a matter of time and money before we find the research that may show that that is incorrect. Until we find it, it is de not the case and that does not mean relying on the research done by Monsanto or Bayer. Until we can find proof that it is not fine, how can we feed that to our children, to ourselves and to our families? Why would we do that? But it is out there. We have given people the right to choose. People can buy organic food, knowing that there is no GM content, unless something blew across the road and got into it in another way or the contamination happened when a truck drove past or when the grain was stored.

The CHAIR: The question is that the report be noted.

Hon DIANE EVERS: If we cannot guarantee that there is no GM content, how will people know that they are buying food that is not contaminated or that they are buying organic food or food that does not have GM content? How will we know?

I think the committee narrowed its focus quite closely and avoided the possibility of looking to the future. Thousands of people put forward a petition saying that they wanted some sort of compensation for farmers. It is compensation that we need, because we want our farmers to have the ability to ensure that their crops are not contaminated when they sell them as either organic produce or produce that is not GM. We do not have that now. We do not have any option for those farmers should something like that occur. We know that this has happened. Only one case has been taken to court. I think it cost nearly $1 million. Why did that happen? Why did it get to that point? Why could we not have put in place some sort of system so that when this occurs, farmers can say something about it? As it is, farmers cannot. Basically, they have to hold their tongue, bear it, get on with it and cover the cost of the clean-up or the diminution of the value of their crop themselves. That is not good enough. This is not the first case. This has happened to other people. They need some way of managing compensation when this happens, because it is not the end of it. With the new gene technology, it is much easier for people to do it. The research no longer needs to be done in expensive laboratories. We are doing more research and we are getting into synthetic biology whereby we are manufacturing meat.

The CHAIR: Under temporary order 4, I have to interrupt the debate, so further consideration of the report is deferred.

Consideration of report postponed, pursuant to standing orders.