

Australia: Brumby GM canola decision sparks Labor opposition

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The November 27 decision by the Victorian Premier John Brumby's Labor government to lift a moratorium on commercially-grown genetically-modified canola has drawn sharp criticism from scientific researchers and environmental activists. Labor MPs declared that the decision had been made secretly, and should have been open to debate.

With the lifting of the moratorium in February, "we would be releasing something into the environment which can never be recalled", Labor MP Tammy Lobato complained to the November 28 Melbourne Age.

She also questioned the independence of Victoria's chief scientist, Sir Gustav Nossal, who had been chosen to chair the government-appointed panel of three which examined the economic issues of commercially growing GM canola in Victoria.

Nossal, and fellow panel member Merna Curnow, were both regarded as GM supporters. Gene Ethics campaigner Bob Phelps said the government had "set up a panel to recommend fast-tracking GM crops into our environment and onto our plates".

Lobato and four other Labor MPs — Martin Foley, Christine Campbell, Jenny Mikakos and Carlo Carli — had written submissions calling for the ban on GM crops to be maintained.

Another MP accused Brumby of "treating caucus like idiots", but Brumby was unmoved. He said that by removing the ban Victoria would enjoy \$115 million in new economic activity over eight years. This figure conflicts with a simultaneously released report from the Network of Concerned Farmers that foresees a loss of hundreds of millions of dollars to Australian farmers if GM canola is planted. Non-GM farmers would have to spend over \$65 million a year to protect their crops from GM pollen contamination.

Nossal told the media he was confident that GM products could be segregated, but then added that there was no guarantee that they could be, and some GM contamination threshold would have to be "tolerated". This is currently set at a 0.9% accepted GM tolerance level.

US anti-GM campaigner Jeffrey Smith, author of Genetic Roulette and Seeds of Deception, contested those claims in articles published in the November 28 Age and the December 5 Melbourne Herald Sun. Smith has worked with more than 30 scientists worldwide documenting 65 health risks of GM foods. He was in Australia in November to give talks and meet with state ministers.

He is concerned that government agencies, such as Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ), do not recognise these dangers, as their assessments are based on what he sees as "industry's superficial studies", which are self-regulated.

FSANZ admits that it does not perform its own research, but bases its decisions on data supplied by big business.

Smith warned that the process of inserting foreign genes into plant cells creates countless mutations throughout the plant's DNA. This could affect natural gene functions by deleting them, or permanently turning them on or off. He believes that this could explain the known changes in GM soy such as less protein, appearance of a new allergen, and higher levels of a known soy allergen that could account for the 50% increase in soy allergies when GM soy was introduced into Britain.

Smith relates incidents such as stomach lesions, liver and kidney toxicity, altered sperm cells, and a five fold increase in infant mortality in GM animal feeding trials, and sterility in farm animals (pigs and cows) when fed GM corn.

He rejects the idea that billions of GM meals have been eaten with no adverse side effects, pointing out that there has only been one human feeding trial and this found that GM genes could transfer into the DNA of gut bacteria and remain functional.

He feels that the tipping point in consumer rejection of GM foods could be reached in the US within two years, and had happened in Europe in 1999. Already consumers are rejecting GM crops, and the US and Canada now heavily subsidise their farmers to compensate them for lost markets because of consumer concerns.

With this growing rejection of GM food and the overwhelming evidence of health and safety issues, Smith queried why some Australian states are lifting their GM bans.

WA Premier Alan Carpenter responded to the Victorian decision by reaffirming WA's decision to maintain its GM moratorium. "I would anticipate that if we can maintain our GM-free status, the market for GM-free food around the world will be even more attractive for Western Australian producers than it is at the moment", he said.

P.S.

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* Janet Grogan is a member of Say No to GMO campaign group. For more information visit "[www.http://www.saynotogmos.org](http://www.saynotogmos.org)".