

2011 Review of the Gene Technology Act 2000 (GT Act)

I have concerns with the implementation of the GT Act. I have followed the debate over genetically engineered crops for several years and have noted a serious lack of balance between the treatment of the benefits and the risks. The benefits have been given well funded, high profile, public relations treatment while the potential long-term risks have been ignored.

I look to my government to protect me from these long-term risks. In particular, I expect the implementation of the act to ensure that:

- a) Buffer zones are adequate and are policed. They need to be designed to make allowance for extreme weather conditions such as floods and dust storms, both of which transport genetic material well away from the source.
- b) Those who suffer as a result of adverse impacts to their health or to their livelihood are automatically compensated.
- c) Biotechnology companies have appropriate insurance, so that they can pay their share of the compensation rather than the burden falling on the taxpayer.
- d) Data is made available to the public about the nature, location and outcome of all field trials in a timely manner.
- e) Safeguards are built into the Act to ensure that evidence from trials is scrutinized by environmental and health bodies as well as those who stand to gain from a positive outcome.
- f) The rights of all affected parties are considered, not just the farmer growing the gm crop and the company selling seeds and herbicides.
- g) The rapidly growing organic industry is not harmed by the introduction of gm crops.
- h) Appropriate segregation of the crop and detailed food labelling are built into the system, at the source, so that individual consumers can assess the evidence and to decide whether or not to eat gm foods.

These steps are necessary because the introduction of gm crops effectively treats Australians and their environment as subjects in an irreversible scientific experiment. If this is to be done responsibly then independent research needs to be done to ensure that there are no risks to vulnerable groups within the population (e.g. children, asthmatics and those with allergies) and also to key environmental elements (e.g. Australian insects and their predators and honey bees).

The introduction of a new technology brings risks as well as benefits. The benefits are usually instant or the technology would not be introduced. The risks are often long term and not necessarily suffered by the group that received the benefits. In addition those who gain are slow to acknowledge the problems. Asbestos, cfc's and cane toads were all heralded as miracle solutions, yet we still suffer their unexpected consequences. It is important that we learn from history and that the GT Act is appropriately implemented so that gm crops are not added to this list.