

Now for the hard sell on modified foods

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Geoffrey Carracher is concerned about the integrity of his GM-free canola crop after the contamination of his canola seeds two years ago while Andrew Weidemann (right) hopes to fill his silos with grains grown from genetically modified seed should a four-year ban on GM crops be lifted.

Photo: *Craig Sillitoe*

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THREE years ago Labor backbencher Luke Donnellan voted for a four-year ban on genetically modified crops in Victoria. Last week Mr Donnellan invited his Labor colleagues to attend a pro-GM meeting at Parliament House sponsored by the Institute of Public Affairs, an outfit not highly regarded in Labor circles.

With the State Government's ban on genetically modified canola expiring in February, supporters and opponents are beginning their lobbying campaigns. The outcome will depend on whether Labor has shifted ground on the controversial technology.

ALP insiders say that senior ministers, especially Treasurer John Brumby and Premier Steve Bracks, regard the ban as running counter to the aim of making Victoria an international hub for biotechnology. "They wouldn't be in Boston (for Bio 2007) saying, 'We're going to extend the moratorium', would they?" asks one Labor MP.

Mr Donnellan told *The Sunday Age* he was generally supportive of genetically modified food. In his email invitation to MPs, he said: "I believe the technology has the potential to assist us to deal with food and water shortages both here and overseas."

Mr Donnellan was one of three MPs — the others are from the Liberal and National parties — who were enlisted by the Institute of Public Affairs to invite guests to hear pro-GM speakers over drinks and finger food in the Legislative Council committee room.

The Labor Party is split over whether to continue the moratorium and is headed for a potentially divisive debate. Already, Tammy Lobato, MP for Gembrook, is gearing up a big campaign. "I urge the people of Victoria to participate in this public debate and consider the evidence," she said. "Going down the GM road is an irreversible path and Victorians need to assess whether this is the right way to go for our farmers, our communities, our environment and our health." She did not believe it was.

One clue to the Government's attitude is the language it uses in its press releases. In 2004, the former agriculture minister Bob Cameron said the commercial release of GM canola "would represent a point of no return for Victoria. The Government believes the risks to export markets outweighs any perceived benefits at this time."

Last week, Agriculture Minister Joe Helper was not convinced about the risk to exports. "In Victoria, the focus will be on what impact the use of this technology would have on our trade markets if the moratorium was lifted," he said.

The institute expects 50 to 70 MPs to attend the meeting. They will hear from Rick Roush, the dean of land and food resources at Melbourne University, Jennifer Marohasy, an IPA fellow, and Chris Kelly, a Mallee grain grower.

The meeting follows a front-page report in *The Sunday Age* last week that the State Government is set to lift its ban on GM crops. The report prompted a large number of letters from readers opposed to GM foods.

Anti-GM campaigners such as Bob Phelps from Gene Ethics and Julie Newman from the Network of Concerned Farmers, are firing their first shots in the new debate. They claim that biotechnology giants Monsanto, Bayer CropScience and Nufarm are funding pro-GM farm lobby groups and the IPA.

The Sunday Age has confirmed that the institute receives total funding of about \$1.5 million a year, of which \$4000 comes from the global agricultural biotechnology company Monsanto.

Mr Kelly, who is to address Tuesday's seminar, is the Victorian convener of the pro-GM Producers Forum and a director of the Birchip Cropping Group. The group's internet site lists its diamond sponsors as including Bayer CropScience and crop protection company Nufarm Limited.

Bayer CropScience in 2003 won approval from the federal Gene Technology Regulator for the commercial release of herbicide-tolerant InVigor hybrid canola in Australia. Last September, Nufarm paid Monsanto \$10 million for the licence to Roundup Ready canola, which also has been approved by the gene regulator.

The biotechnology giants spent tens of millions of dollars developing these seeds. Moratoriums by state governments halted release of both manipulated canola varieties.

In 2003, Professor Roush and his scientific collaborators received \$20,000 from Bayer and Monsanto for research into canola pollen. He said it was the only funding he had received from those companies in 30 years of research.

Julie Newman, of the anti-GM Network of Concerned Farmers, points at a group called Agrifood Awareness, which she said was the main policy adviser for farm groups lobbying in favour of genetically manipulated crops.

She claimed the Grains Research and Development Corporation, which imposes a levy of 1 per cent of gross sales on farmers, contributed \$100,000 a year to Agrifood Awareness. She said the levy was supposed to pay for grain research.

Agrifood Awareness executive director Paula Fitzgerald said the money was also used for workshops in gene technology run with the CSIRO.

Ms Fitzgerald said moratoriums in Victoria and elsewhere had led to international companies doing less research here, especially on grains. She said the bans signalled there was no path for the commercialisation of GM products here.

The State Government is expected to announce details of its moratorium review soon. The Agriculture Minister, Mr Helper, said the review would be limited to the potential impact on trade.

Professor Roush said that when the ban was imposed in 2004 there were concerns that Japan or European countries would not buy genetically modified canola or crops from Australia. These had proved to be invalid, he said. "A lot of the concerns people had a few years ago have passed us by and Australia has been passed by as other places are using the technology," Professor Roush said.

In 2003, the Victorian Government commissioned Professor Peter Lloyd to assess market risks to trade if Victoria planted GM canola. He found no evidence that the US or Canada had lost market share because of their canola GM exports, or that consumers were willing to pay a premium for non-GM foods.

Professor Lloyd recommended limited release of GM canola varieties in a trial for coexistence with non-GM crops. The Government rejected the report and imposed a four-year ban on GM canola.

Meanwhile, the United Dairyfarmers of Victoria will begin a series of forums tomorrow in Cohuna and Shepparton before a policy debate on the issue next month.

The June annual meeting will consider a "pro choice" policy that says it is up to farmers to decide if they want to use GM crops. Also up for discussion are separate motions for and against the continuation of the moratorium.

THE CASE AGAINST

Geoffrey Carracher, 66, Minimay, west of Horsham

GEOFF CARRACHER is already wary of how genetically modified produce can get into the food chain.

In 2005, the fourth-generation grain farmer discovered his canola seeds had been "infected" at his distributor with GM seeds created by Bayer.

His crop was later cleared and declared GM-free.

Mr Carracher's biggest concern is once GM seeds become commercially available, they would spread to all crops through pests, wind and human error.

He said he was yet to see any independent tests that proved the health safety of GM food or financial viability for the grower.

"We have no idea what will happen down the line," he said. "It's something that should be tested over 20 years. They are going to force us into something that we know is not proven to be any better."

He said the multinationals Bayer and Monsanto were hiding behind a wall of silence. This, he said, included their refusal to release statistics on GM crop yields against non-GM yields.

He said farmers whose crops started growing GM seeds accidentally would be made to pay licensing fees to avoid litigation, part of the multinationals' plan to monopolise the seed industry.

"In the end we will have to buy their seed and buy their chemical products," he said.

He said he would refuse to grow GM crops if the moratorium was lifted but conceded he might be forced to change his stance over time.

THE CASE FOR

Andrew Weidemann, 42, Rupanyup, east of Horsham

FOR grain farmer Andrew Weidemann, genetically modified food is the revolution Australian farming has to have.

Crops that are cheaper, healthier and better for the environment, and achieved with higher yields is how he sees the outcome.

"It's all about the right to choose the best technology that's provided to us," he said. "It will allow us to produce crops that give all sorts of benefit, from lower trans-fat levels to ... wheat that can be eaten by people who are flour-intolerant.

"In the past, we've had a heavy reliance on herbicides and pesticides, but this technology means we will use a lot less of this. It makes farming a lot more cost-effective. We can go from spending \$70 a hectare on herbicide to between \$15 and \$20."

Mr Weidemann, 42, sees no big difference between the traditional crossbred seeds Victorian farmers now plant and GM ones.

Genetic science, he says, just does it more efficiently. "It's smarter science, that's all it is."

Traditional crossbreeding is like throwing darts at a dartboard and hitting with one in every six darts.

Bio-technology means you can hit the board every time. It's about being able to pick the right gene.

Mr Weidemann understands concerns about GM foods but says they are the result of Greenpeace scare-mongering.

"Because so many people don't understand it, they will say they don't want GM. But 95 per cent of people will buy it if it's cheaper. It's bloody hypocrisy."

REID SEXTON

Who stands to benefit?

■ MONSANTO

Leading biotechnology company. Its Roundup products are the world's best-selling herbicides. Last year it recorded global seed sales of \$US4 billion (\$A4.9 billion). In Australia it sells genetically modified cotton. It recently sold its Roundup Ready canola to Nufarm.

■ NUFARM

Based in Melbourne and listed on the ASX, Nufarm operates in New Zealand, Asia, Europe and the Americas. It makes products that protect crops from weeds, pests and disease. Last year it reached profits after tax of \$121 million on sales of \$1.68 billion.

■ BAYER CROPSCIENCE

The global Bayer healthcare group subsidiary Bayer CropScience was established in Australia in 2002 after the acquisition of Aventis CropScience. It provides insecticides, herbicides and fungicides and holds a GM canola licence.