

How Secure is Our Food Source?

By Amanda Guggenheimer



A farmer inspects his canola crop.

A 'True Food' war looms. The public is divided. Some individuals are still blissfully unaware, others do not care, and many prepare to fight. The outcome is unknown, but what is certain, government decisions are shaping our core food source in this lifetime.

Australians are generally a relaxed and easy-going bunch. It is rare for public issues to incite a wide cross section of individuals from parents and farmers, to leading scientists and medical professionals. Genetically modified (GM) crops, the result of seed altered in a laboratory through genetic engineering, have taken the spotlight, and there is nothing relaxed about the Australians opposing them. Strong organisations such as MADGE (Mothers Are Demystifying Genetic Engineering) and 'The Chef's Charter' supported by over 100 Australian chefs, form but two of the groups fighting for the long-term integrity of Aussie food.

When the Victorian government lifted the ban on GM canola crops in February this year, the public outcry alerted many previously unaware

Australians of the dramatic changes to the food source occurring under their noses. 'Changing the genes of an organism re-writes the instruction for the production of the proteins that underpin the physiology of the organism - its health benefits, its toxins, how it grows, flowers and dies etc. Where it was once impossible, now human genes can be transferred to tobacco, fish genes into strawberries, soil bacteria genes into corn and cotton,' says Greg Revell, public educator and lecturer for Gene Ethics. 'The biotech industry assures us that their gene does exactly as it's supposed to, but their assertions are not backed up by independent testing which has huge ramifications for health,' says Revell.

The impact of GM foods on public health is a major concern for Dr. Judy Carmen, Epidemiologist, Biochemist and Director of the Institute of Health and Environmental Research. 'Long-term animal studies that measure things relevant to human health and conducted by people independent of GM crop vested interests are needed before we can say that GM foods are safe to eat,' says Dr. Carmen.

'Amongst other things, these studies should look at toxic effects on the organs of the body, reproductive health, allergies and cancer.'

The lack of clear evidence to ensure the safety of GM for both human and animal consumption alarms Julie Newman, National Spokesperson for the Network of Concerned Farmers. 'The tests done have found problems and yet the GM industry is trying to avoid independent testing. What are they so frightened of?' asks Newman. Principle research scientist, Dr. Maarten Stapper, raised the same issues with his former employer CSIRO. 'CSIRO doesn't allow internal questioning of GM, (it's only pro-GM that counts), no scientific discussion, questions are not answered, and as a farming systems agronomist, I was told not to talk to farmers or the public against GM, with the threat of being fired,' says Dr. Stapper.

For Julie Newman, Dr. Stapper's case only further demonstrates that Australian organisations lose their objectivity if they are set to gain financially from GM. 'The Federal government is part of the problem, and

the regulatory process is nothing more than a public relations exercise as the aim is for governments to capitalise on their investments in biotechnology, not to find a problem with the food,' says Newman. 'GM canola was proven as safe and yet the canola oil was never tested. The remaining meal which is used for stock feed is not regulated because FSANZ [Food Standards Australia New Zealand] has no authority over stock feed.' According to Dr. Maarten Stapper, the plot thickens even further. 'FSANZ analyses the reports submitted by the GM manufacturers. GM scientists are also scientific advisors to FSANZ. There is a conflict of interest,' says Dr. Stapper.

Julie Newman's organisation worries for the farmers who may be left 'holding the baby' once their land has become contaminated by genetically modified organisms. 'The outrageous deception and unethical techniques to push GM policies through the farm lobby groups is unprecedented. Farmers have been misled as GM canola cannot offer an agronomic, economic or environmental benefit,' says Julie Newman.

A recent report compiled in April this year, by the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), highlights the global economic impact of biotechnology. 'In developing countries especially, instruments such as patents may drive up costs, restrict experimentation by the individual farmer or public researcher while also potentially undermining local practices that enhance food security and economic sustainability*'. The assessment also recognises issues farmers face through the inevitable spreading of GM in open paddocks. The report states that, 'Farmers face new liabilities: GM farmers may become liable for adventitious presence if it causes loss of market certification and income to neighbouring organic farmers, and conventional farmers may become liable to GM seed producers if transgenes are detected in their crops*'.
 This fact is not lost on Beverly Mustchin. Motivated by her science

education and her passion for organic food, she moved swiftly into action to coordinate the massive anti-GM campaign in Victoria's South Gippsland. 'When the moratorium ended on February 29, I decided that I live in the best place on earth and I wasn't going to give in without putting up the fight of my life,' says Beverly. 'The lifting of the ban has allowed GM



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canola to be released into the field. It can spread into weeds and the natural environment by wind, flooding and be carried by animals on their fur. GM canola oil has not been safety tested in any part of the world,' warns Beverly. She currently has petitions in over 60 shops and businesses and has collected over 1,500 signatures in her local region. Her public education campaign has organised forums, mass letter submissions to newspapers and documentary screenings in community halls.

By informing the community, Beverly Mustchin is taking the right action says Jason Blake, overseer of five large-

scale family owned supermarkets in Australia. 'The consumer holds the power in relation to GM food. If people refuse to eat GM produce, then its position in the marketplace is seriously threatened,' says Blake, who has watched supermarket trends closely over the last 13 years. 'Labelling is the biggest hurdle for consumers, as foods containing GM ingredients or animal products where the animal ate GM grains etc, are not clearly marked.' According to Jason Blake, since the lifting of the ban, shoppers must watch out for products such as olives and sun-dried tomatoes packaged in GM canola oil. 'Buying foods labelled 'Australian Certified Organic', 'NASAA Certified Organic', 'O.F.C (Organic Food Chain), T.O.P (Tasmanian Organic-Dynamic Producers), and BDRI (Biodynamic Research Institute) currently ensures the highest level of protection. Certified organic foods do not contain GM in any part of the food chain or production. There are also plenty of non-organic companies committed to being GM free. Some of these companies are wisely marking their products GM free, and are worth researching.'

The not-for-profit, 'True Food Network' researches the GM status of food companies for consumer benefit. The information is free to download from www.truefood.org.au. Growing one's own food is always an empowering alternative. The Australian based 'Digger's Club' is a reputable mail order organic and heirloom seed supplier for the home vegetable gardener. With big question marks over health and environmental consequences, and the economic impact on standard and organic farming, the public has good cause to demand transparency from the GM food industry. The sheer number of individuals and businesses banding together to keep Australia safe is a strong reminder of what is achievable when the public takes a stand. 'We can still win a GM free future in Australia,' says Beverly Mustchin. 'We just have to speak up.'

*Source: IAASTD Executive Summary of the Synthesis Report - Biotechnology, April 2008. See www.agassessment.org for full report. ■