

Genetically Engineered Crops | Steve Lancaster

Reclaim the Food Chain Forum | Monday 3 December | Sarah's Café, Adelaide

When I was asked to make this speech a few weeks ago, I was hoping to come here with some good news on the issue of GM food. So here it is. On the 27th of October this year, just a month or so ago, the President announced that France, the European Union's biggest agricultural producer, had decided to impose a ban on the commercial production of genetically modified crops, making France the sixth country in the EU to impose a ban, the others being Germany, Austria, Greece, Hungary and Poland.

Then there's the Republic of Ireland – another good news story. Like Australia, it's worth noting, Ireland is geographically isolated from its neighbours and, also like Australia – *if you believe what Australian politicians say* – the Republic is particularly concerned about the market outcomes of commercial GM production. Unlike Australia, however, the policy of the Irish Republic's government is to declare the whole of Ireland a GM-free zone. The reason? And I quote:

“Our geographical isolation protects us from potential contamination by wind-borne GM pollen. So declaring this island off limits to GM crops will clearly position Irish farm produce as the most credible, safe GM-free food brand in Europe. This will boost the safety, quality, reputation and economic value of Irish food in the lucrative EU export markets. It will provide a competitive advantage to Irish farmers and food producers for generations to come.”

If only Prime Minister Rudd showed any signs of having such an enlightened view.

I'm from Europe, as you may have gathered, and I am simply appalled at the decision made by the New South Wales and Victorian State governments to lift the moratoria on the commercial production of GM crops. What are they trying to do? Haven't Premiers Brumby and Lemmon ever heard of the cane toad? Or is it that they're blinded by science? Or by the colour of the biotech industry's money? Whichever, their short-sightedness means that the GM genie is out of the bottle. And once it's out, you can't get it back in again. It's goodbye to Australia's reputation as a clean, green country – permanently. And for what?

Let me very briefly describe for what. Three whats – the agricultural economy, human health and the environment.

When it comes to the economic consequences of the introduction of GM crops you should listen to Julie Newman of the Network of Concerned Farmers. She's just released a report which shows that the decision to introduce GM canola will cost Australian canola farmers 143 million dollars a year. The main problem is the one that Canada has already faced and so the lesson really should have been learned. In reality, in practice – as demonstrated in the field in Canada – you simply cannot segregate GM and non-GM crops adequately. Cross contamination is inevitable and, as a result, non-GM crops will gain a reputation for being tarnished – whether they are or not – with resultant price penalties and market rejection. In October this year, a Japanese delegation representing 2.9 million Japanese consumers, farmers and retailers toured the relevant Australian state capitals begging them not to lift the moratoria on the growing of GM canola. Now that the moratoria have been lifted, you can be sure that Japan will be looking elsewhere for its imports. Think about the Republic of Ireland and compare it with what is going on here. It simply doesn't make sense.

I mentioned the Canadian experience. Here, in a nutshell, is what happened. In 1999, Canada introduced the commercial production of GM canola. The result? It immediately lost its lucrative canola market in Europe. And guess who it lost it to. The irony is rich. It lost it to Australia because Australia – at the time – was GM-free.

And consider this. According to statistics produced by the US Department of Agriculture, between 1999 and 2002, GM crops cost the US economy 12 billion dollars in farm subsidies, lower crop prices and the loss of major export orders. Now I'm no Peter Costello. I've never even studied economics formally at school or at college. So that must explain why I find it hard to understand the economic logic of Premiers Brumby and Iemma.

Then there's the health issue. Judy Carman, Director of the Institute of Health and Environmental Research, a respected scientist based in South Australia, points out that **no** large-scale scientific trials have been conducted into the long-term health effects – if any – of the consumption of GM food. We simply do not know whether the health of people suffers if they eat large quantities of GM food over a prolonged period. We do know, however, that CSIRO decided to abandon a ten-year study into the effects of feeding to mice a genetically modified field pea resistant to insect attacks. Why? Because the mice developed lung inflammations and started to die. And we do know that the liver weights in rats fed canola meal made from GM canola increased by 12 to 16 percent. And we do know that there have now been three feeding trials on GM potatoes, all of which showed – quote – “significant organ damage”. One Russian study concluded that the GM potatoes were “toxic” to lab rats and – quote – “cannot be used in the nourishment of people”.

Of course, the biotech industry might say that I'm picking up on the exceptions and not the rules. Well – where is their evidence that GM food is safe to eat? As Judy Carman points out and again I quote:

“Rather incredibly, a recent literature search of the safety assessments of GM foods currently available in Australia yielded safety assessments of only one food – Monsanto's Roundup Ready soy. Furthermore, it was written by Monsanto-paid scientists.....So how can we be satisfied that GM foods are safe when independent scientists cannot easily verify the accuracy and veracity of the results of existing safety assessments?”

And finally, the environment. Let's dispel a couple of myths. Myth number 1, the production of GM crops will mean a reduction in the use of pesticides and herbicides. Hear this Ian McDonald. It is simply not so. In August of this year, Bill Freese of the US Center for Food Safety provided data produced by the US Department of Agriculture which shows that, although 81% of GM varieties grown are herbicide-tolerant, the use of herbicides – like Roundup and worse – has actually increased because Roundup-resistant weeds are becoming rampant. In 2006, for example, 42% more Roundup was used on GM soybean fields than in 2005. And because the weeds are now becoming resistant to Roundup, an alarming 129 percent more 2,4-D was used – a herbicide known to trigger reproductive problems and birth defects in agricultural communities.

So on to Myth number 2. A myth that will resonate in the driest state in the driest continent – namely the myth that GM technology will allow farmers to grow drought-resistant wheat. Great idea. But, unfortunately, currently only in the realms of science fiction. True, there have been trials in Victoria. But these are only proof-of-concept trials. That is, their aim is to determine whether a wheat plant will take-up the desired gene or genes and then survive and grow in an open field. The wheat varieties being trialled are **not** varieties that a farmer could plant. And, even if these trials succeed, it will be **20 to 30 years** before drought-tolerant GM wheat can be produced with the disease resistance and other characteristics that farmers want, such as being the right sort of wheat for bread or pasta. So when they say GM will help combat the drought, unless they mean the drought's going to last for another 20 to 30 years – in which case, I doubt whether GM wheat will be at the top of the agenda – when they say that, they are trying to dupe what they hope is an ill-informed public.

Look! – as the politicians say when they want to show they're serious – I've only scratched the surface. I haven't spent even a smidgeon of my talk lambasting the biotech companies for the economic vice with which they'll squeeze Australia's farmers until they're dry. I haven't devoted any space to the legal actions which the biotech companies will be bringing against conventional or organic farmers who have the misfortune to find GM crops growing on their land. Nor have I mentioned the likely loss of agricultural exports to China or cited the evidence which shows that the yield produced by some GM crops – for example, some soya beans in the USA – is actually lower than that of conventional crops. I haven't even plugged Jeffrey Smith's book 'Genetic Roulette'.

My main point is this. Elsewhere in the world it is people pressure – consumer pressure if you will – which has driven change. Why do you think leading supermarkets in the UK have phased out all GM products from their own-brand ranges? Because people – customers – don't want to eat Frankenfoods. And it's the same here. The vast majority of people don't want GM food. Poll after poll shows this. Yet the politicians – the people's representatives – are happy to ignore that unhappy truth. That's the problem with representative democracy. It places the representatives above the people.

But hey, don't blame the politicians. If somebody offered you an all-expenses paid trip to the USA to tour a couple of state-of-the-art labs and stay in a plush hotel, you'd be tempted wouldn't you?

No, don't rely on the politicians. By all means, lobby them and, especially – and I emphasise this – try to pressure the new Labor government into imposing a blanket ban, a ban which covers the whole of Australia. That's what a federal government is for, isn't it?

But don't expect much joy. Much better is to rely on people power, consumer power. Buy organic. Buy local. Join Greenpeace's True Food Network and find out which companies use GM and which don't. It has worked in Europe. It has worked in Japan. Maybe, in time, it can work here.

That's all I want to say. Thank you for listening.