Letter to the Editor, Rural Press, Stock Journal
18.10.2005

Sir,

We refer to the letter from Dr Jason Able regarding GM cropping. The National Association for Sustainable Agriculture, Australia (NASAA) is one of Australia's largest organic certification agencies and was the host organisation of the IFOAM Congress and Go Organic Festival. We assure Dr Able that the Australian organic industry welcomes informed public and media debate on this issue. In fact, the organic industry is probably the most outspoken interest group in the GM debate. This is because, based on actual industry experience to date, it is the livelihood of our operators that will suffer the most immediate negative impact if widespread GM cropping takes place in Australia.

In this instance we point out that there is a major difference between 'organic scare-mongering' and the legitimate identification of the significant threat to the viability of organic and conventional farming in Australia that is posed by over-zealous broad scale adoption of GM cropping technologies. That is: in the current environment, before effective safeguards against cross contamination of other crops have been implemented and proven.

To attain the status 'certified organic', and therefore achieve a market (let alone a 'competitive edge'), Australian organic farmers must be able to demonstrate there is no GM content or contamination of any kind in their product. Every organic farm is required to maintain a constant vigil against such threats – not just from GM crops, but from windborne chemical drift and other potential contaminants. For this reason, organic farming today is one of the most rigorous production regimes in existence, with a particular focus on food safety and traceability.

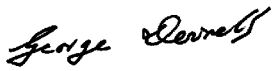
We believe it is a legitimate expectation that any farmer implementing a GM production strategy has an absolute obligation to contain all GM materials within the farm boundaries in order to avoid any threat to the livelihoods of (organic) neighbours. If this cannot be guaranteed, then the GM operator should either not proceed until an effective regime is in place; or be able to demonstrate the resources to compensate others for each and every case of 'accidental contamination'.

While we might accept the individual examples of GM success tendered by Dr Able, the global experience to date has been that no effective guarantee can be offered. The Canadian organic canola industry has been an early and complete casualty as a result of persistent GM contamination. Australia already has recent, scientifically documented cases of 'accidental' GM canola contamination in conventional crops that have been identified by very health conscious and significant customers like Japan.

We believe Dr Able would agree that Australian agriculture is increasingly characterised in marketing terms as 'clean and green'. This may be our best road forward in maintaining global competitiveness. If that is to be the case, we simply can't afford "GM accidents". We must bear in mind that it is market demand that is driving organic industry growth, whereas the pro-GM argument is entirely production driven, and supported by a complete absence of customer enquiry.

In the overall context of Australian agriculture, GM croppers are the 'new kids on the block'. Therefore, before large scale commitment, it is incumbent on the GM industry to definitively demonstrate how it can safely manage its own space without damaging the established businesses of either organic or conventional farmers, either at an individual farm level or in terms of ongoing access to crucial global agricultural commodity markets.

Implementation of a broad scale GM cropping strategy without such a demonstration would be to effectively tilt the competitive playing field in favour of GM operators by increasing the business risks of all other Australian farmers. For these groups to identify and manage such threats is sound commercial sense – and certainly not 'organic scare-mongering'.



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