

GENETICALLY MODIFIED CROPS FREE AREAS ACT — REINSTATEMENT

Motion

Resumed from 9 May on the following motion moved by Hon Diane Evers —

That given the government spoke so vigorously against the Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Repeal Bill 2015 when in opposition, that the government now reinstate the Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Act 2003.

HON COLIN TINCKNELL (South West) [3.00 pm]: Thank you, Madam President. I would like to continue discussing the merits of genetically modified crops. First of all, I will put on the record the negatives of any proposed ban in the future. In this state, weed control is now the single biggest impost, or input, on costs. I believe the average cost is up to \$1 million per year, which is \$120 per hectare, so that is an issue. Herbicide resistance costs in Western Australia are over about \$1 billion, which is a major impact, and it is worsening. The potential ban on GM crops would result in more chemicals being used to combat weed resistance. Since the introduction of GM crops, mainly cotton, the use of over 80 million kilograms of active chemical ingredients has been avoided in Australia. That figure is from CropLife Australia for 2016.

On food safety, I would like to note that GM foods on the international market have passed risk assessments and are not likely to present risks to human health. No effects on human health have been shown as a result of the consumption of such foods by general populations in countries where they have been approved. That is one major tick.

On farmer behaviour, in recent years, the price of non-GM canola has been higher than GM-grown, due to the decreasing supply of non-GM canola. Premiums have reduced in recent times due to the acceptance of GM canola into the European Union, which has reduced demand for the higher priced product. A key point is despite the higher price for non-GM product, farmers will determine the best management and decision-making strategies to increase their long-term financial return and environmental resource health, and they should be allowed to use GM crops as part of this strategy. Farmers care about the land, farmers look after the land and farmers need this extra tool in their toolbox. It is a major issue. It is the farmer's choice. They look after the land and they know it better than anyone sipping lattes in West Perth, regardless of their expertise. I remind the house that we just heard an amazing tribute to an amazing person who obviously knew the rural areas of Western Australia very well. The ability of government and Parliaments to listen to people on the land was quite clear in those tributes. We must always learn from past experience and we need to note that.

The repeal of the GM ban has given WA growers certain things. It has given WA producers greater certainty to manage their production planning. It has given growers the ability to farm best practice on their land to maximise production and economic return. It has given them a reduced regulatory burden. It has provided access to new technologies, particularly into new crops—fruits and vegetables. We have improved crop varieties that are climate resilient and that have health benefits. The repeal of the GM ban has also improved international competitiveness in the sector.

One Nation supports pro-choice of GM crops, meaning it will facilitate the best management frameworks that allow any farmer to best manage their farm or enterprise, ensure regulatory power remains and ensure that checks and balances exist to not disadvantage those growing non-GM crops. That is a very important point. To maintain product integrity, Pauline Hanson's One Nation would support a scheme that also includes training and accreditation courses. As I mentioned, One Nation supports pro-choice for GM crops.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Matthew Swinbourn): Hon Ken Baston, I think, has the call.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: Sorry, I think I was up first.

Several members interjected.

HON KEN BASTON (Mining and Pastoral) [3.07 pm]: Thank you, Mr Acting President. I am sure the minister will be able to have her say and comment on my words, seeing that I was the Minister for Agriculture and Food at the time of this bill coming into this house.

It is very important to discuss this issue, even though I am a little surprised that I am talking about it again. It is like revisiting it some four years ago. I was not going to say anything at the beginning, but I think I should contribute a little to debate on this motion. First, I will go back on a little of the history. The bill first came into this house in 2003. The act came into operation in 2004 and the government of the day banned all GM crops in the state. All GM crops in the state were banned when the Genetically Modified Crop Free Areas Act came to fruition. I suppose the danger again is that by just a stroke of a pen all GM crops in the state could be disallowed.

Quorum

Hon Colin Tincknell; Hon Ken Baston; Hon Aaron Stonehouse; Acting President; Hon Alannah MacTiernan;
Hon Darren West; Hon Diane Evers

Hon AARON STONEHOUSE: Mr Acting President, I may have counted wrong, but I do not think we have a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Matthew Swinbourn): No, we do have quorum.

Hon AARON STONEHOUSE: We do. There is no point of order then.

Debate Resumed

Hon KEN BASTON: Thank you. I thought he was going to dispute some of my figures.

With the change of government in 2008, the government gave a special exemption to allow GM cotton to be grown commercially in the Ord in 2009. Everyone thought that it was just a trial, but it was not and GM cotton could be produced commercially in the Ord. In 2010, another exemption order went out for commercial cultivation of GM canola within Western Australia, but they still needed an exemption. As I was saying, that was the weakness of the exemption, because farmers could start to use it, but they could easily lose it as well.

The regulator for genetically modified food is the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator, which is federally based, and it is also run in the federal Department of Health. The Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority is responsible for agricultural and veterinary chemicals. Once again, the Australian government is the regulator in that sense. Thirdly, of course, there is Food Standards Australia New Zealand. Those three groups are responsible for the assessment, and of course it is federally funded. They are a safeguard in getting past that. The Office of the Gene Technology Regulator is regarded as the best in the world. One can see why it was so important to give more security to those farmers once they started using, say, GM canola or even cotton for that industry in the Ord.

This technology has already been proven in many cases to increase yields while very much reducing pesticide requirements. It is estimated worldwide that since 1995 GM crops have reduced pesticides used by some 37 per cent, increased crop yields by some 22 per cent and increased farmer profits by some 68 per cent. I strongly believe farmers are best placed to decide—we have heard that since debate on this motion has been going on—which crop and method of farming will deliver the best results and long-term benefits to the business. The take-up of GM canola in this state has been significant. This demonstrates farmers see value in the crop and are confident in its ability to withstand Western Australian conditions. That is something we always aim for with better science—we can grow good crops in dry climates and with less water.

In 2017, GM canola was due to make up approximately 34 per cent of Western Australia's canola crop. It is inconceivable to think we would deny farmers access to biotechnology that is available worldwide. Western Australian farmers have demonstrated significant support for the product and it would be financially reckless to turn around and change the playing field after so much growth in the market. I quote from a summary of a study authorised by Graham Brookes and Peter Barfoot in 2017, "Farm Income and production impacts of using GM crop technology 1996–2015" —

This annual updated analysis shows that there continues to be very significant net economic benefits at the farm level amounting to \$15.4 billion in 2015 —

This is worldwide —

and \$167.8 billion for the 20 year period 1996–2015 (in nominal terms). These gains have been divided 49% to farmers in developed countries and 51% to farmers in developing countries. About 72% of the gains have derived from yield and production gains with the remaining 28% coming from cost savings.

A similar report also states that across Australia during the same 20-year period, farm income benefits from GM cotton and canola are estimated to have been well over \$1 billion. The estimated benefit takes into account impact on yield, quality and the cost of technology, such as buying seed. The potential for the agricultural industry throughout Western Australia to expand into new areas and crops through the use of biotechnology is significant. There has been no demonstration why this progress should be limited.

The availability of genetically modified cotton has allowed growers in the Ord region in our north to once again explore growing cotton. The downstream benefits to the local economy should be a success. That is absolutely significant. I will touch again on that a little further along. Kimberley Agricultural Investment Pty Ltd is looking to resurrect the cotton industry and, if the required scale can be achieved, has put forward the possibility of processing cotton in the region, which would be a great addition to the Kimberley's economy. I assure members that Kununurra is a town that needs some employment prospects. Much of this is possible thanks to advances in gene technology which has led to the development of cotton varieties that have enhanced pest resistance and tolerate different climates.

A report in the *Farm Weekly* on 25 February this year stated —

Extract from Hansard

[COUNCIL — Wednesday, 16 May 2018]

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Hon Colin Tincknell; Hon Ken Baston; Hon Aaron Stonehouse; Acting President; Hon Alannah MacTiernan;
Hon Darren West; Hon Diane Evers

Cotton has not been grown on a commercial scale in the Kimberley since 2011, with the industry facing several challenges including pest control problems and quality issues.

Heavily involved in the operation is KAI farm manager Luke McKay who oversees the company's cropping program through the irrigated Ord River Valley and is one of this year's Western Australian Nuffield scholars. The report goes on —

Typically, cotton has been planted in the dry season in the Ord, but developments in genetically modified technology have made an earlier sowing window viable.

Mr McKay said developments in Bollgard 3 technology —

I think that was mentioned in somebody's speech the other day —

had opened the opportunity for a wet season crop.

They have planted in February. Normally they plant in July but they have gone into the wet season. They hope to harvest a crop in July. It continues —

“The advancement in the Bollgard technology—which is the insect management gene in the cotton—has made a big difference, it controls heliothis caterpillar and spodoptera caterpillars which have been a big problem,” he said.

“Normally cotton was only grown during the dry season which starts around April, but because of Bollgard we get control over caterpillars which we have a much higher prevalence of during this time of the year.

It has been confirmed that two of these caterpillars have crossbred and created a hybrid species in Brazil. This natural occurrence could have disastrous effects on crops throughout North and South America. It is estimated that up to 65 per cent of crops could be affected by this hybridised species if it were to spread. This scenario highlights how important it is that farmers have access to biotechnology that can help them stay ahead of such threats.

Stepping back and looking at this from a global perspective, it appears obvious that GM technology will be a large piece of the puzzle that needs to be solved if the world's population is to have access to enough food and, more importantly, nutrition. Western Australian farmers need to be a part of the future, and any attempt to stymie this technology is a step backwards.

In 2016, a group of Nobel Laureates—107 in fact—published an open letter openly criticising the anti-GM movement and pleading for this movement to accept the considerable weight of scientific evidence that states GM food products are safe and have the ability to improve health and meet the food needs of the world's growing population. I quote from this letter. It states, in part —

The United Nations Food & Agriculture Program has noted that global production of food, feed and fiber will need approximately to double by 2050 to meet the demands of a growing global population. Organizations opposed to modern plant breeding, with Greenpeace at their lead, have repeatedly denied these facts and opposed biotechnological innovations in agriculture. They have misrepresented their risks, benefits, and impacts, and supported the criminal destruction of approved field trials and research projects.

We urge Greenpeace and its supporters to re-examine the experience of farmers and consumers worldwide with crops and foods improved through biotechnology, recognize the findings of authoritative scientific bodies and regulatory agencies, and abandon their campaign against “GMOs” in general and Golden Rice in particular.

Scientific and regulatory agencies around the world have repeatedly and consistently found crops and foods improved through biotechnology to be as safe as, if not safer than those derived from any other method of production. There has never been a single confirmed case of a negative health outcome for humans or animals from their consumption. Their environmental impacts have been shown repeatedly to be less damaging to the environment, and a boon to global biodiversity.

This is why I say that I am mildly surprised to still be here talking about this issue. It is quite clear that embracing GM technology, like many technological advancements throughout history, will lead to a better future. I am in clear disagreement that the Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Act should be reinstated. Once a crop has been deemed safe by the federal regulator, I firmly believe that growers should have the choice to plant those crops without the burden of acquiring exemptions and further approvals. It is clear that the grains industry is capable of managing the segregation of GM and non-GM crops and does not require further government intervention. The Western Australian grains industry has protocols and procedures in place to enable GM and non-GM canola to meet market requirements and it is confident in its ability to achieve this on a long-term basis. Reinstating this act will take us back to a climate of uncertainty for growers, as I expressed earlier, looking to plant the most effective

Hon Colin Tincknell; Hon Ken Baston; Hon Aaron Stonehouse; Acting President; Hon Alannah MacTiernan;
Hon Darren West; Hon Diane Evers

crops. It will also send an anti-investment message to agribusinesses looking to set up in Western Australia. I think it is really important that we consider that, as we have foreign investment into agriculture; it is a fait accompli. We do not want to give the message that they are not going to be able to grow what they need to grow. We will also send an anti-investment message right across Australia.

I would like to finish with a quote from a Western Australian farmer named Bindi Murray from Woodanilling, who contributed to the Agricultural Biotechnology Council of Australia publication I mentioned earlier. She said —

“GM canola is now an integral part of our cropping rotation, and the availability of this technology, and the weed control benefits it offers have allowed us to purchase properties with significant weed issues in the last few years. By using GM canola in our rotation we can bring these properties back to their production potential in half the time, while producing a great crop,” ...

I have a few notes I dug up. It takes some 13 years and \$136 million to bring a new GM crop to the market. Since the introduction of GM canola, Australia has produced more than 17 million tonnes of GM canola. Of course, one of our biggest competitors is Canada, which has 90 per cent GM canola.

I would quickly like to get back to what was happening at the Ord, which I just touched on, at the exciting time of planting 350 hectares of cotton in February. The opportunity is for 350 hectares. Some trials were done last year and they were successful. This is really a commercial trial, whereas the others were just trials. If production can be built up to 10 000 hectares of cotton, the building of a mill would be looked at. That would produce in the order of \$40 million to \$60 million worth of cotton. More importantly, 58 per cent of the weight of a cotton crop is from cottonseed. Cottonseed is highly used in Queensland for beef production, and it is said that even on these 10 000 hectares, there would be enough cottonseed to feed 50 000 to 100 000 head of cattle, because a 10 000-hectare cotton crop will result in 30 000 tonnes of seed, which is a lot. We can imagine that if that crop got bigger and was doubled again, we could really concentrate on not only producing cotton in Kununurra and Western Australia and exporting it—it would be high-quality cotton of course—but also increasing the production of our beef and offering better quality beef than has perhaps been shipped out before. There are some exciting times ahead. We certainly do not need any people stepping in and trying to curtail GM canola, cotton or any other crops that will be produced. When I was a minister, I found it a bit ironic that South Australia was doing trials of GM wheat, yet it would not let us cart GM canola seed through the state. South Australia was also producing uranium and shipping it out of its ports. I asked whether I could use the same drums used for uranium to ship the seed by road, because if they were secure enough for uranium, they had to be secure enough to carry canola seed, but the South Australian government was adamant that it would not do it. I am not quite sure what South Australia was going to do with the GM wheat if it was successful. I am sure that one of the other states would have used it even if we did not pick it up. The Ord is the classic example of GM crops being used to increase productivity in the state and increase jobs—everything we hear each government say.

Hon Jim Chown: For the goodness of mankind!

Hon KEN BASTON: Yes, for the goodness of mankind. I thank the member!

I am sure that commonsense will prevail. Hon Darren West made a long, long speech on this topic for some eight hours.

Hon Jim Chown: And he said nothing!

Hon KEN BASTON: No, he said a lot! His mouth was moving!

Jokes aside, I think the policy of the Labor Party changed before the last election and I am pleased not to support the motion.

HON ALANNAH MacTIERNAN (North Metropolitan — Minister for Agriculture and Food) [3.27 pm]: I thank the member for moving this motion. I think it is important that these topics are debated, because there is a lot of complexity surrounding them. But we will not support this motion today, because going to the last election we made it very clear that we would not seek to take back control of genetically modified crops in Western Australia. This represents a considerable change, I guess, from the position our party has had over the previous 15 years, but it was our view that the debate had moved on to a considerable extent, that there had been considerable use of genetically modified crops in Western Australia and that we needed to accept that. Nevertheless, in our policy we indicated that we believed more work needed to be done in the area of farmers' rights to coexist, as well as in the areas of farm-to-farm and supply-chain contamination and incursions of GM plants into public areas. We are also of the view that labelling laws need to be improved so people really have clear choice over the products that they consume, and if people felt strongly that they did not want to consume a GM product, they should have the right to do so, acknowledging that there is indeed a market premium for doing that and for us producing non-GM foods.

Hon Colin Tincknell; Hon Ken Baston; Hon Aaron Stonehouse; Acting President; Hon Alannah MacTiernan;
Hon Darren West; Hon Diane Evers

I am not the uncritical spruiker of GM, unlike some of our colleagues here, because there are obviously complexities with GM, but as Hon Colin de Grussa recognised, the notion of a genetically modified crop is a many-splendoured thing. There is a great deal of variation within the concept of genetic modification. It might be the “Frankenflies” that, when we first got into government, were holed up in South Perth. They were a fruit fly that had been genetically modified to include a synthetic virus that caused one’s progeny to explode. That is obviously a much more challenging beast, if one understands anything about science and the possibility for a transgenic transference of those things, than the latest GM crop that we have approved, which is a genetically modified safflower seed, in which the modification consists of turning off a ribonucleic acid to suppress a particular gene within the flower to increase its oleic oil content. The phrase “GM” covers many, many significantly different orders of issue, as I said, including synthetic viruses, which are a bit more challenging to deal with. We must always keep our minds open to the complexity of the biological systems we operate in and not be mindless spruikers, but be critical and selective adopters of the technology where it is useful.

Around 30 per cent of canola is GM canola. We have been advised that there is no problem with segregating GM from non-GM, and that no producer has lost their market due to GM contamination. I understand the complex argument Hon Diane Evers mounted that over time this could be different as crops are replanted and the very low levels of contamination could compound in some way. I accept that, but that is something that needs to be tested empirically over time. Hon Colin Tincknell tried to play down the premium paid for non-GM crops, but currently the premium for non-GM crops is about \$30 and is going up; it is between \$505 and \$535 for non-GM canola, so there is a good premium. The charts show that although the premium oscillates somewhere between \$25 and \$60, there certainly is no trend line down for that premium. Clearly, we should be keeping our minds open to the market imperative of the benefit of non-GM. I note that leading horticulturists in the state, Nick and Jim Trandos, have told us about the premiums that they are getting for their non-GM corn. They get much higher prices because they are able to sell their non-GM corn. We should also be mindful when we consider how WA will get into the premium end of the food market and not just be stuck at the commodity level. Even the grain areas in the Black Sea and the Argentine are building their product and occupying that lower end of the food chain, and we must be looking at that.

Hon Rick Mazza: Just with that difference, you are talking about the premium price for conventional grains. That really, though, is a farmer’s choice, isn’t it, to meet those particular markets? If someone is wanting to grow conventional grain to get the premium, although import costs might be higher, or GM, I mean, that should be the farmer’s choice.

Hon ALANNAH MacTIERNAN: It is a choice. I think someone in this debate referred to people who were concerned about GM as being latte drinkers. It is important that we are realistic about the debate. Here is a fact: non-GM, whether it is corn or canola, attracts a much higher price. If we consider ourselves to be hard-nosed commercial people, we should be thinking about that. If we as a government are encouraging our market to move towards the premium end, that should be a consideration for us. I point out that at this point in time—putting *Marsh v Baxter* aside—no-one has lost a market because the segregations have proved inadequate. Western Australian non-GM canola growers are able to get that premium. It is important that we make sure that we protect that, and that is why we are doing that. That is a lot of the problem with GM. I know that a number of members had various “Saul on the road to Damascus” moments; that is, they had formerly been anti-GM and are now realising that GM is absolutely everything, as though they have been struck by a GM flash of lightning! One thing that very early on formed part of the critique, and still does in many places, was around the economic legal issues of GM. There are concerns, particularly in poorer countries, that instead of being able to grow their own seed to plant the next crop, farmers must abide by the intellectual property rights of the big seed producers and that more and more is being extracted from often very poor farmers.

Hon Jim Chown: I said in my address in regard to the issue of golden rice that you should redirect that statement, because the Gates foundation has overcome this. The seed is simply donated to the growers, with the outcome that it will be beneficial to 50 000.

Hon ALANNAH MacTIERNAN: The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation can do that, but a lot of the major seed producers are no Bill and Melinda Gates. I am just setting the context that a lot of that early anti-GM is —

Hon Jim Chown interjected.

Hon ALANNAH MacTIERNAN: Sorry. Are you saying that they have bought all the intellectual property rights around the world for seed?

Hon Jim Chown: Growers, whether they are poor or wealthy, whether they are from Third World countries or First World countries, would not take on a GM crop unless they could see a benefit from it, whether they had to pay for the seed or not. It doesn’t make sense.

Hon Colin Tincknell; Hon Ken Baston; Hon Aaron Stonehouse; Acting President; Hon Alannah MacTiernan;
Hon Darren West; Hon Diane Evers

Hon ALANNAH MacTIERNAN: I am sorry. I am prepared to take the occasional interjection, but if the member looks at history, that very much was part of the original suite of concerns that existed around GM. Golden rice or no golden rice, that remains the truth.

Hon Jim Chown: Part of it is the hypocrisy and the myths put out there.

Hon ALANNAH MacTIERNAN: Talk about emotional! I find it interesting that Hon Jim Chown is now becoming extremely emotional. His critique of people, like Hon Diane Evers, who raise concerns about GM is that they are very emotional and are not able to be half hearted, yet when I talk about economics, Hon Jim Chown gets more and more emotional. His antipathy to anti-GM is as emotional as it is to GM. I note that Hon Jim Chown gets very upset whenever he hears words like “regenerative agriculture” uttered. That reminds me of a young farmer I met down at the Mt Barker races earlier this year who has a very successful intergenerational farming business—broadacre grain, plus a winery. He said that when he tells other farmers, not in a preachy way, just when they ask about his property, that he is organic, farmers get really angry with him, “Oh well, you can’t be making any money!” He tells them he is making good money and they say that cannot be right. I put to Hon Jim Chown that the emotion does not go only one way. The emotion comes back the other way from people who do not want a sensible forensic debate to pull apart the good and bad bits and the problematic areas. The member is a great enthusiast for glyphosate, and I understand that virtually all farmers in Western Australia use levels of glyphosate; even regenerative farmers use some glyphosate, but they try to reduce it. One of the big concerns about genetically modified crops arose partly because people did not recognise the whole suite of interventions within a genetic strain of a plant that could constitute GM, but partly it was also the fact that much of the early GM was very much focused on developing herbicide resistance. Overwhelmingly, the early work was done by companies like Monsanto that were then able to benefit from selling vastly increased amounts of glyphosate. Hon Jim Chown was getting very agitated about —

Hon Jim Chown: And emotional, minister.

Hon ALANNAH MacTIERNAN: — Hon Diane Evers’ comments on glyphosate. I recognise that this is part of the suite of modern farming within Western Australia, but certainly the aim must be to reduce that level. There is no doubt that glyphosate is a very big issue in Europe. A World Health Organization finding in 2015 was that it may be carcinogenic, and a lot more work is going on around glyphosate use in Europe. Indeed, it was one of the impediments to the Germans forming government because one of the agriculture ministers had gone off, without cabinet approval, and agreed to a five-year extension of the use of glyphosate in the European Union. The other side of the grand coalition that they were trying to stitch together was very angry. These are not trivial issues; they are important.

A very unusual thing happened in our department, and I have not really ever been able to understand it. Maybe Hon Ken Baston might be able to advise us on how Monsanto bought into a grain breeding company owned by the state government. I understand Monsanto was looking at breeding genetically modified wheat, but it appears—also I was advised—that there was very little market for this type of genetically modified wheat and so it sold its interest back to the Department of Agriculture and Food and moved on. That of course created some concern amongst some of the non-GM farmers about the even-handedness of the department in dealing with the *Baxter v Marsh* case, but whether that has any legs to it, I cannot say.

It is interesting that I see from the range of GM trials or plantings in WA today that very many are not aimed at herbicide resistance. A range of field trials are going on for wheat for tolerance to soil acidity and aluminium. I was amazed to see that, because I remember talking to a group of farmers in Toodyay in 2001 about how we were going to fund the six lime roads that we had to build because the soil was acidifying or getting aluminium toxicity. I suggested genetically modifying some crops, and they said it was the most ridiculous idea. I said that it would have been a lot cheaper than building all those roads! I am pleased to say that I was obviously on the ball, and the University of Adelaide is trialling this. There is also trialling of the biofortification of grain with iron, and trialling of drought tolerance—a lot of work has been done in picking out genes from plants in South Africa—frost tolerance and salt tolerance. That is a useful point today in light of the Auditor General’s report on the lack of control of the salinity problem.

The GM picture is very complex and there are trials around the state. We are allowing those, and in many instances encouraging them. Nevertheless, we of course remain open to the science and understanding the systemic impact that some GM products might have, particularly those that rather than suppressing a gene, have built into them pesticide or herbicide resistance, and whether there will be any long-term consequences on the soil. I have been to see the GM cotton growing in the Ord, and I absolutely understand the growers’ desire for a new crop they can rotate. I hope that their growing of a GM product does not interfere with the status of their subsequent winter crop, particularly for those growing chia, although the market for that has gone. Do not laugh too loudly at the latte drinkers, because they eat a lot of the hipster products our horticulturalists are obtaining a lot of money from.

Hon Colin Tincknell; Hon Ken Baston; Hon Aaron Stonehouse; Acting President; Hon Alannah MacTiernan;
Hon Darren West; Hon Diane Evers

We believe that glyphosate is an issue and we cannot be uncritical spruikers of its use. We need to understand how using high levels of nitrogen can, as Hon Diane Evers said, supercharge weed production, requiring more and more levels of glyphosate. We are having massive problems with glyphosate-resistant plants. At last year's Dowerin field days, one of the agriculture guys had penned a song and was singing, "I've the glyphosate-resistant wild radish blues", to try to educate farmers about the impact of glyphosate-resistant wild radish. It just goes to show what an innovative lot the lovely agricultural science people in the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development are!

I appreciate Hon Diane Evers raising this issue. We will not take that step backwards. We think GM is part of the panoply of products that will help us deal with many of the issues of productivity and things like acidification and salination of our soil, but we are not mindless or uncritical embracers of industrial agriculture. We understand that we need to keep a watching brief on how these will affect other growers, although there is no evidence of that to date, and the impact on the environment of some of the sequelae of the increased use of glyphosate et cetera. We are dealing with complex systems, and Hon Diane Evers rightly pointed out that it often takes many years for us to really understand the systemic changes that have occurred. I urge all members to keep an open mind on the assessment of these matters.

HON DARREN WEST (Agricultural — Parliamentary Secretary) [3.50 pm]: I will very briefly add to the comments made by the Minister for Agriculture and Food. What a fabulous agriculture minister we have! She is the first woman to be the agriculture minister in Western Australia and in my assessment, members, she is equal-first as the best agriculture minister we have had in Western Australia. I was very in awe of Hon Kim Chance when he was agriculture minister. I think that those are two outstanding agriculture ministers; they are equally as good as one another and the best the state has ever had. Apologies, Hon Ken Baston; I know you were the agriculture minister for a while, but I genuinely think those two were ahead of you.

I acknowledge Hon Diane Evers in moving this motion and I have a lot of sympathy with the intent of her motion. Members will remember that I made a longish speech to the chamber when we were trying to thwart the repeal of the Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Act 2003. As members of the opposition will know, when a party does not have the numbers in the chamber, one of the things that it can do is try to convince the government to perhaps change its view. I spent an awful lot of time doing that, but the government duly did not change its view. The previous government was not great at listening, but it certainly did not listen to the only working farmer in the house. I think I still have that esteemed role today. During the debate on this motion I will add a few words in support of what the Minister for Agriculture and Food said because I have a lot of comfort in that minister's capacity, as I have detailed, to deal with the GM issue very objectively. I also have some sympathy with the intent of the motion moved by Hon Diane Evers.

I was concerned when the Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Act was repealed. I was concerned about what might come next. Fortunately, before it lost office, the previous government made no radical decisions about this; in fact, contrary to what I believed at the time, the repeal of the Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Act has made zero difference to farming in Western Australia. Only one crop was grown commercially after the introduction of the Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Act, which, as funny as it may sound, allowed GM crops to be grown in WA and allowed research to be done. GM crops were grown in Western Australia under the auspices of the Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Act on approval from the agriculture minister. My point in the lengthy repeal debate was that an elected person in Western Australia should make that decision. Fortunately, we have a very competent agriculture minister who I believe is very influential in that decision. When I started my contribution to that debate, I asked members of the house to whom they were referring that very important decision and no-one could tell me. Nobody knew to whom we were referring that important decision.

The world has now moved on and the repeal of the act has made no difference whatsoever. Cotton was grown in the Ord for one year, but never again, and Roundup Ready, or glyphosate-tolerant canola, is grown around the wheatbelt and has not been the panacea we were told that it may be. About 30 per cent is grown and that it is a pretty static amount. It has not really changed much over the last three or four years. By definition, members, most people who grow canola in Western Australia choose not to grow genetically modified canola. Not all people who are concerned about the introduction of genetically modified canola in Western Australia are the Fremantle latte-sipping set—apologies to the member for Fremantle. Some of our biggest farmers in the wheatbelt voiced the most concern about the introduction of genetically modified crops and the impact that contamination may have on their business, whether they were an organic business or, as in the case around Williams that I recall very clearly, in the seed production business. Most farmers are not raging supporters of genetically modified crops—most of them are not. There is significant resistance to genetically modified crops across the agriculture sector. Of course, we had the case between Steve Marsh, a fabulous bloke who was going about his life farming his way, organically, on his farm, and his neighbour, Mr Baxter. It is a terribly sad case in which there were no winners, but the genie was let out of the bottle without any thought being given to what might happen in the event of that type of

Hon Colin Tincknell; Hon Ken Baston; Hon Aaron Stonehouse; Acting President; Hon Alannah MacTiernan;
Hon Darren West; Hon Diane Evers

contamination. What a sad outcome it was. It was a source of much commentary around the world and ultimately everybody lost. We would like to see a mechanism by which that can never happen again. I think that this minister is onto that.

The Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Act served us particularly well. It allowed us to do the research and preparatory work for the introduction of genetically modified crops in Western Australia. It was very good legislation that was introduced in 2003 by the then agriculture minister, Kim Chance. But there seems to be a deluded view that the presence of that act stopped, as many members have quoted, the benefits of genetically modified crops. There are some benefits to farming systems of genetically modified crops, but they continued under the auspices of the GM crops free areas act. They were continued. To say that we denied farmers access to technology with that piece of legislation is utter nonsense. Hon Colin Tincknell talked about all this cotton. It is not in Western Australia. Hon Jim Chown talked about golden rice, but it is not in Western Australia. There is only one genetically modified crop grown in Western Australia and that is glyphosate-resistant canola. It was wrong to say that the presence of that legislation, if, as Hon Diane Evers is suggesting, the act were reintroduced, would have an adverse effect on farmers wishing to grow GM. That is nonsense, but policy has moved on. As part of the McGowan Labor government, we understand that consumers all around the world and here in Western Australia remain sceptical about consuming GM material. I note that most of our GM canola that goes to Europe is made into fuel. These days it is an energy crop rather than a food crop. Most of the GM cotton that is bought is not consumed. People around the world and here in Western Australia and Australia have an aversion to putting genetically modified food into their mouths. That is a fact and we cannot walk away from that fact. As a consequence —

Hon Jim Chown: What about cottonseed oil, which is used in probably every fish and chip shop in the state and most of it derives from the United States and most of it is GM derived?

Hon DARREN WEST: Okay. How much cotton are we growing in WA? None. We grew it once and it did not work.

Hon Jim Chown interjected.

Hon DARREN WEST: I point out —

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Dr Steve Thomas): Order, members!

Hon DARREN WEST: Member, I took your interjection and I dealt with it.

Hon Jim Chown interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Order, members! Hon Darren West has the call.

Hon DARREN WEST: About 30 per cent of canola in WA is GM, as I have said, which would probably equate to somewhere between one and two per cent of total grain production in Western Australia. Canola is a relatively smaller grown crop. We grow it just as a break so that we can grow more grain afterwards. It is not anywhere near the biggest crop consumed. Only 30 per cent of that is canola, so we are down to around one or two per cent of total grain in Western Australia being produced that is genetically modified. It is a very, very small sector of the market. We need to be careful that we do not damage the other 98 to 99 per cent of our market with this relatively small amount of grain.

The economics of growing genetically modified canola are not good. The cost of seed is prohibitively expensive for many farmers at about \$100 per hectare and the crop price is significantly lower. There is a significant premium for non-GM canola or a significant discount for GM canola. Today, with the marvels of modern technology, as a working farmer I get the grain prices from CBH, Australia's largest grain marketer, delivered to my phone. If I were to market my canola today, had I had some to sell, and it were non-GM, I could sell that to CBH for \$535 a tonne. That is free on board down at the port. But if that were GM canola, I would receive only \$496 a tonne from CBH. It is a \$39 a tonne difference and that is getting up in the order of probably about eight per cent. That is a significant discount and why a relatively small amount of GM canola is grown—the economics are not good. Its value is in a break crop in which every weed can be sprayed out between cereal phases. Farmers have to make more money from subsequent cereal crops to cover the economics of growing genetically modified canola and farmers make the decision to do that. Today, the discount is \$39 a tonne and that discount is because consumers are not that comfortable with putting GM food into their mouths and the mouths of their children or family members.

I have to give special credit to and make mention of Co-operative Bulk Handling Ltd, the grower-owned cooperative, of which I am a shareholder, to make that clearly known. It has done an amazing job in the last seven years of segregating GM and non-GM canola. A major contamination between the two would be disastrous. Every tonne contaminated would be a negative \$39 premium. If all the tonnes of canola grown around Western Australia were added and multiplied by 39, a major debacle would cost us significantly and damage our reputation internationally. CBH has been able to manage the segregation particularly well and, as members would know,

Hon Colin Tincknell; Hon Ken Baston; Hon Aaron Stonehouse; Acting President; Hon Alannah MacTiernan;
Hon Darren West; Hon Diane Evers

even when people make mistakes, CBH has still managed the segregation with zero tolerance of GM canola getting into non-GM canola bins. I applaud CBH for that because I was concerned that it may not be the case and we could not always stand here —

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: It has been an extraordinary achievement.

Hon DARREN WEST: It has been an extraordinary achievement, minister, and I am pleased the minister acknowledges that as well. CBH is a fine organisation. It is owned by Western Australian growers to store, cart, ship and sell grain in Western Australia. I take my hat off to CBH for the extraordinary job it has done. However, we allow another layer of risk in the supply chain by having to be so stringent with this segregation and the requirement for no contamination. As we know, contamination can occur between farms. We saw that in the Marsh v Baxter case. It was nobody's fault; the wind picked up some GM canola swathes from a windrow, carried them across a fence and dropped them into an organic property that then lost its status as an organic farm. The farmer was then out of pocket in the order of about \$80 000 because of that loss of organic status on part of his farm. It was a terribly unfortunate event, but it should be able to be covered. If I spray a chemical on my farm and it drifts through to the neighbour's paddock and kills a strip of crops along their fence, or if my livestock get out of my property and into the neighbour's paddock and trample all their crops, or if I burn off a paddock on my place and it gets out of control and destroys the neighbour's sheep feed, under all those circumstances, I am required to compensate my neighbour. I do that by taking out public liability insurance that covers such events. I still do not understand why GM contamination of an organic farm could not be added to that set of circumstances and be covered by that insurance.

Hon Rick Mazza: I have a serious question because you are a professional farmer. If conventional grain is growing on one farm and organic grain is growing on the next farm, any spray drift from herbicides, insecticides or fertiliser would also contaminate the organic crops, would it not?

Hon DARREN WEST: Correct, and I would be liable to compensate that grower for the contamination that I caused. So why would I not be liable in the instance of GM contamination? Why is there no uniform set of rules so that no matter how my actions on my side of the fence impact my neighbour and cost him money, under any circumstance, it would be covered under that insurance?

Hon Rick Mazza: Are you saying that your insurance policy terms cover spray drift and fertiliser drift onto organic farms, but not GM?

Hon DARREN WEST: It covers spray drift and fertiliser drift onto any farm. The point should not be whether the farm is organic, conventional or GM; it should be whether I have caused the farmer loss.

Hon Rick Mazza: But your policy doesn't cover GM?

Hon DARREN WEST: No, so Mr Marsh was not covered by Mr Baxter's public liability insurance. If he had been, their insurance companies could have got together and worked out a deal, and it would not have ended up in the Supreme Court. We can still do that regardless of whether the Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Act is reinstated, but I think we should because I do not ever want to see two families and a community go through that again. It divided the Kojonup community. I do not want to see anybody have to go through it again. Farmers should not suffer financially under any circumstances because of the actions of their neighbours; and, if they do, there should be some recompense.

The economics of GM is not good. I have talked about the price and said that CBH has done a great job segregating the canola. We need to look forward with this issue. My fears about the repeal of the GM crops free areas act did not come to fruition. In fact, the repeal of the act made zero difference to agriculture in Western Australia. Another thing that the public gets a little bit tired of is the political ping-pong when one party does something and the other side reverses it, then there is a change of government and it goes back and forth. Sector-wide, we need to look objectively at what is in the best interests of agriculture and we are certainly prepared to do that. Let us look forward. Let us talk about contamination, which we have just done across the chamber with that very good interjection from Hon Rick Mazza, who raised an important point. Let us talk about the coexistence of organic farmers, conventional farmers and GM farmers, which is important right through the supply chain, up and down the roads, in the CBH bins, on the ships and at the ports. We need to think about all that and if there is contamination, who is responsible and who will pay?

Western Australia has had the highest increase in organic hectares of any jurisdiction in the world. I grant that much of that is in pastoral areas to run organic cattle. Out on the Nullarbor, members of the Forrester family have done an amazing job switching their operation to an organic beef farm. They have retained a significant premium for their product. That is smart; that is what we all should be getting our heads around because if consumers want an organic product and they are prepared to pay for it, why would we not pursue that market and encourage

Hon Colin Tincknell; Hon Ken Baston; Hon Aaron Stonehouse; Acting President; Hon Alannah MacTiernan;
Hon Darren West; Hon Diane Evers

producers to get into that space? It is not just for beef. Of course, we also produce organic wine, olives, wheat, oats and all kinds of agricultural products. I think farmers have the right to make that decision. Equally, as Hon Jim Chown said, farmers should have the right to decide to grow whichever genetically modified or non-GM crops they want. If we transfer his logic all the way through the debate without emotion, organic farmers should have exactly the same right as that espoused by Hon Jim Chown. I enjoy the interactions between the Minister for Agriculture and Food and Hon Jim Chown. It is great to listen to them go at it across the chamber.

This is a political issue that divides the chamber, communities and the agricultural sector, and conflicts individuals. That is what makes it a difficult political issue. We are not afraid to take it on and come up with the best solution for agriculture, consumers and those concerned about the way food is grown in Western Australia. Unfortunately, Hon Diane Evers, I do not see that solution as returning to the Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Act. Although it served us well, I think we can pick out the concerns and better aspects of this debate and work them together for the benefit of the agricultural sector in Western Australia. I am comforted by the fact that we have a minister with the capacity and the will to do so, and I am sure that she will do that successfully over the course of her tenure as Minister for Agriculture and Food. We are not abandoning the principle. The now opposition had a view that there should be a GM free-for-all in Western Australia but we do not hold that view. However, in the interest of the debate and the interest of agriculture, we are prepared to concede that sometimes we have to find some common ground. As I touched on in the debate about the export of live sheep, it would be good to put all the politics to one side and deal with the issues as they arise to determine the best interests of Western Australia because, ultimately, that is what we are here to do.

HON DIANE EVERS (South West) [4.09 pm] — in reply: It has been interesting listening. It is not the first time that I have been on my own in a debate. I appreciate the issues that have been raised but I would also like to acknowledge that many of them have had nothing to do with the debate that we were having. This is about the Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Act that was repealed in 2016 without due diligence, without sufficient analysis of the effects on overseas markets, and without taking community interests into account.

I want to make clear that I may not have made it perfectly clear in the first instance in my opening remarks that the Greens support human biomedical genetic engineering research that is conducted in accordance with scientific and appropriate ethical principles. Members can see this on the Greens' website; it is there will all our other policies. We are not against genetic engineering; that is not the point. What I am looking for with the reintroduction of this act is for Western Australia to have the capacity to decide what is best for Western Australia. That is what the Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Act was about. Even the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator, which Hon Ken Baston said is the best in the world—I would love to see who was on the panel that decided that, but that is fine—knows this, because the regulator put it into its policy. The Office of the Gene Technology Regulator judges GM crops based on safety, health and environmental aspects. The regulator realised that state governments may need legislation to protect their markets, so written into the Gene Technology Agreement between all states and territories is a provision to recognise areas designated under state law for the purpose of preserving the identity of GM crops or non-GM crops for marketing purposes. That is what I am stating.

It was pointed out that in 2016 maybe nobody knew to whom we were giving this decision, or this capability. I hope that I have made it clear that it is the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator. The regulator decides, but it does not look at the effect GMOs might have on our markets. By not having this act in place, even though the regulator suggested that each state should have one, we are giving the regulator the power to decide on principles that are not related to the market. Really, we have to accept that we are all responsible. The people in this room right now who refuse to go along with the idea of introducing this act are responsible should another GM crop be planted and grown in WA that in some way we do not yet perceive will affect our market to sell the non-GM crop, or any other crop. In 20 years' time, I hope that I am not in this seat debating how we will fund payments to people who have lost markets for this. We are responsible and we cannot get away from that.

In 2003, Kim Chance said —

The Bill will allow the State Government to designate areas of the State, or the whole State, as areas where specified genetically modified food crops may not be grown. This will be done by ministerial order if it is believed to be necessary to protect the State's markets for conventional crops and to protect our reputation as a "clean, green" source of agricultural products.

It has been said, it has been stated and we know it. If we ignore it, it is our responsibility.

A number of scientific reports telling us how good GMOs are came up in this debate. I am not debating how good GMOs are. A number of scientific reports state that no health issues have been found. I am not debating whether there are any health issues with GMOs. We needed to be quoting economists in this debate, the people who have looked at markets and understand the effects they can have, not just the science about GMOs. We are not debating the quality of GM crops. This motion is not about the value of GMOs as a food source and it is not about banning GM canola. It is not even about banning continued research into GMOs that may one day solve our issues with

Hon Colin Tincknell; Hon Ken Baston; Hon Aaron Stonehouse; Acting President; Hon Alannah MacTiernan;
Hon Darren West; Hon Diane Evers

salinity, drought, pests, diseases or whatever. It is not about stopping technology. We have to recognise, as was stated, that the science of genetic engineering is a rapidly changing field and that means that we need a precautionary approach to deal with the knowledge and experience we are gaining. It is not a chance to throw caution to the wind and just let in anything that has been developed, has been through the regulator and has been approved because it is okay as food. It is changing and we need to do something to manage that. It is up to us and that is why we are here. That is why we have a state government.

Hon Jim Chown said —

One of the questions asked in this particular report is whether it is safe to grow and eat GM crops and food. I think that is where Hon Diane Evers is going with this motion.

That is not where I am going with this motion; it is where the consumers are going and therefore the market. That is the point: to say that people are purchasing GM products is not proof that they do not care; it is more likely that they do not have a choice or are unable to determine whether a particular food has GM content. As long as consumers choose non-GM food, there will be a market and there will be a price differential, because people will be willing to pay to make sure that they do not eat GM food. That market is of value to us; we sell a considerable amount of commodities through the international market.

Debate interrupted, pursuant to standing orders.

[Continued on page 2849.]

Sitting suspended from 4.15 to 4.30 pm