

To the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs
Petition 69

The petition calls for protection for GM-free farmers from contamination of their land and their product through retention of and reviewing the Genetically Modified Crop Free Areas Act 2003 (GMCFAA) and a legislated Protection Fund for farmers.

The GMCFAA is clearly needed to enable Western Australia to decide what crops are grown and where. While the National Regulatory Body and Gene Technology Act provide over-arching legislation governing the introduction of GM crops, Western Australia should retain the right to govern in this new and highly sensitive area of agriculture. Assessment of the costs and benefits of each new modification needs to be done at State level. While the seed and biotech industries push for deregulation for their own commercial advantage and control, we, as farmers, demand to have our land, our enterprises and our markets protected. We believe the Act does go some way in providing protection in that GM crops are assessed on a case by case basis taking into consideration our unique landscapes and our particular grain markets.

There is strong worldwide market rejection of the idea of GM wheat, and yet researchers and some farm lobbyists still call for it. Indeed, there have been trials in our grain belt and further applications for GM wheat trials in 2015. The West Australian Government must be able to control the release of such a seed in order to protect our billion dollar wheat exports. Huge shipments of grain have been returned to America from China and Japan recently because of low levels of GM contamination or un-approved GM varieties, generating class legal actions. Our struggling wheat belt farming districts could not sustain this type of loss.

Since 2010, exemptions have been granted to allow the growing of GM canola in WA. There have been many cases of contamination, some publicized, many not. No provision has been made to protect the many conventional farming operations impacted, either on farm or through the handling and marketing of produce. The Calcutt Review of the Act clearly stated more needed to be done in this area of regulation, not less. Calcutt called for full discussions with all stakeholders to improve the workings of the Act.

Our neighbour in Williams has established a GM-Free canola export business to Japan and buys grain directly from our self-declared GM free-farming zone. The threat of contamination along the supply chain from seed purchase to the growing, contracting operations, storage, handling and freight, is a constant worry to him and his Japanese clients. The added burden of protecting this supply and preserving and proving the identity should be borne by the introduced GM canola grower or supplier.

Adjustments to the GMCFAA are required to specifically enable farming to continue in WA the way it has for nearly two hundred years, that is, the farmer allowed to collect and retain his seed and sell his excess without it being contaminated with GM. If there is a flouting of that, the owner of the patented seed must be responsible for the incursion. A Farmer Protection Fund, contributed to by the GM farmer and biotech industry, could go some way to addressing this iniquity. The legislation needs to guarantee that market rejection of grain due to GM contamination is the responsibility of and be costed to the supplier and grower of that contaminating seed.

While the petition calls for protection within farming, I hope that it brings to the attention of the committee a much bigger and more important issue – food and food safety. Our grain goes global and feeds children. We are talking about the future of humanity and the planet. The question of why people want to avoid eating GM and why farmers want to avoid growing GM needs to be asked.

If there is concern about the regulatory process (and the Canadian system on which ours is based has been described as Corrupt to the Core by its Chief Scientist of thirty-five years, Dr Shiv Chopra) it needs to be acted upon by all levels of government. The CEO of DAFWA's plant breeding body, Intergrain, was recently quoted as saying they could fast track GM wheat to the commercial stage by using the "substantial equivalence" clause (if it looks like and behaves like then it is substantially equivalent and does not require independent and long term testing). This is the corruption of the process I am referring to and if brought to the attention of policy makers, surely requires investigation and action.

I have not had the opportunity to address many issues and concerns related to the core of the petition –the right of choice (what we grow and eat); the spread of GM through the food chain (feeding animals GM grain and by-product); the need for labelling of GM food; and corporate control through influence at educational institutions, research and development stages and the control of seed and chemical. It is complex and serious and does require to be regulated, not de-regulated, as proposed by the current Minister.

While acknowledging the Government has a difficult job to do, I ask that it not shirk its responsibilities or bury its head in the sand. Unfortunately the beast was allowed to bolt, but we should be very concerned with the nature of the beast (and there is a whole lot more in the test tube). There is overwhelming evidence pointing to the dangers of genetic modification and we need wise and considered governance totally independent of commercial interests to decide how we legislate for it. Perhaps the government can be proactive and be prepared for the next chapter by introducing a Genetically Modified Animal Free Areas Act 2015.