

Food production must not be controlled by a few corporations

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A new report prepared for the Federal Government on genetically modified canola crops is being used to support the lifting of state bans on growing commercial GM canola. Federal Agriculture Minister Peter McGauran says this report confirms that GM canola would offer significant economic and agronomic benefits for Australian farmers.

Yet the report contains no new revelations, and even acknowledges the possible market advantages of remaining GM-free and the continued strong public opposition to GM food.

The introduction of moratoriums in most states that began in 2003 were largely based on economic and trade considerations, with farmers, farmers' organisations, processors and food marketers concerned about the loss of overseas markets and the loss of the price premiums being received for non-GM canola crops.

The report acknowledges that there may still be price premiums and greater market opportunities for non-GM crops. The European Union has maintained its ban on the importing of GM canola seeds, and many food companies prefer non-GM canola for human consumption because of consumer rejection of GM foods. Of the 20 canola-producing countries, only Canada and the United States grow GM crops and this amounts to just 17 per cent of global canola production.

One problem with growing GM canola is that the engineered genes quickly contaminate the fields of non-GM canola, as has happened in Canada and the US. So many conventional non-GM farmers as well as organic farmers oppose the introduction of GM canola and other crops.

In 2003, the decision to impose state bans on GM canola was made in the context of strong and continuing public opposition to GM foods, with surveys around the world confirming that most citizens do not want to eat GM foods.

The varieties of GM canola licensed to be commercially grown if the bans are lifted are herbicide-tolerant varieties. Monsanto, the world's biggest seed company, owns the Roundup-tolerant varieties and Bayer, the world's biggest agri-chemical, company owns the Basta-tolerant ones.

These GM crops are engineered to survive being sprayed with chemical weedkillers that would otherwise kill the crop itself. Herbicide-tolerant crops are thereby being used to expand the range of situations in which, and the doses of, chemical herbicides that can be applied.

As weeds related to canola — radish, turnip and charlock — also become resistant to the herbicides, other even more toxic chemicals will be used. GM crops offer, at best,

a Band-Aid solution to weed-management problems or other agro-ecological crises facing chemical-industrial farmers.

Aside from some narrow and questionable economic and agronomic benefits, the bigger question is what else we are committing to when we open the door to GM canola and other food crops.

First, there are new health and ecological risks. The genetic modification of plants to introduce new agronomic traits may also induce other changes in the plant and the ultimate food product. Few independent studies have been conducted into the safety of GM foods, yet our food regulators continue to approve these foods for environmental release and human consumption largely based on data supplied by the companies that own these GM seeds. GM crops also introduce an entirely new form of pollution into the environment: genetic pollution.

Second, GM crops enable the continuation and extension of chemical-industrial agricultural practices, and may exacerbate some of the existing ecological problems associated with them. For example, GM crops introduce a higher level of uniformity into food crops, and accelerate the erosion of seed diversity and other forms of biodiversity.

Genetic engineering is essentially a tool for finetuning chemical-industrial agriculture, rather than offering ecologically sustainable alternatives to it, and further locks farmers into this system of production.

Third, genetic engineering is allowing the further concentration in corporate ownership and control of the agri-food system. GM seeds are patented and controlled by a handful of global corporations. These corporations not only own the seeds, but also the chemical inputs that these seeds require to perform as intended. Farmers must pay "technology fees" on top of the price of the seeds, and are also asked to sign contracts that stipulate how these seeds are to be used. GM technology brings the total control of the global food supply within reach of this handful of global corporations.

To accept the introduction of GM crops is to allow what will amount to a significant shift in the structures and practices of agricultural production. I refer to this in terms of a broader shift from a chemical-industrial to a genetic-corporate system of agri-food production. The development of new nanotechnologies for agri-food production — such as nano-chemical pesticides — is likely to reinforce these agro-ecological and socio-economic trends.

Opposing GM crops and maintaining the state bans on GM canola is a way of resisting the genetic-corporate and nano-corporate takeover of the global agri-food system, and of maintaining a space in which alternative, ecologically sustainable and socially equitable ways of producing and sharing seeds, crops and foods may flourish.

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