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By William Rolleston

The New Zealand Centre for Political Debate

Local Government and Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs)

“Rust never sleeps” nor does the movement opposed to genetic modification. Despite setbacks at the Royal Commission, in the courts and at the polls anti-GM groups continue to chip away searching for that weak link. They have had more than ten years to mount a credible scientific argument against the use of genetic modification yet sadly for them they have not managed it.

Rebuffed by central government they have focused their attention on local councils where they hope the scrutiny of their argument will be lighter and their message of fear will have more traction.

So we see the release of a report commissioned by a group of Northland local territorial authorities (LTAs). The report, written by anti-GM campaigner, Simon Terry, is predictable in its advice that LTAs can indeed set rules to control GM use. That much is obvious and doesn't appear to be in dispute, however what the report fails to address is the enormous cost a council would incur in setting up a mechanism to control GM production and the difficulty they would have to justify this step.

Remember that the Environmental Risk Management Authority (ERMA), with a budget of 12-13 million dollars, will have already assessed the GMO application. It will have considered the scientific, economic, spiritual, health and environmental impacts of any introduction. It will have determined that the benefits of introduction outweigh any risks and may have imposed controls based on its assessment. The hurdle for any GMO to be introduced into New Zealand is very high. An LTA would have to show it has credible

information and expertise ERMA does not have in arriving at a decision to set additional controls.

The Terry report, as with much of the anti GM rhetoric, has the implicit assumption that GM organisms are less controllable, less predictable and less safe than other organisms. Quite simply the evidence does not justify this position.

Since the discovery of genetic modification 30 years ago it has been used in the laboratory, in medicine, in industry and in food production. The introduction of GM in agriculture occurred 10 years ago. Yet in all that time and with all that opportunity there have not been any adverse environmental nor health effects attributable to GM.

In 2004 eight million farmers grew GM crops on 81 million hectares in 17 countries and it continues to increase. The evidence continues to show that the approved use of GM is safe, having benefits for farming and the environment. The cumulative benefits of GM production is estimated by PG Economics in their paper “GM Crops: the Global Economic and Environmental Impact - The first Nine Years 1996-2004” to be US\$ 27 billion with a reduction in pesticide use of 172 million kilograms. The National Centre for Food and Agriculture Policy estimates GM has increased crop yields in the USA by 1.8 million tons per annum. et despite 60% of soybean, corn and canola farmers using the benefits of GM crops in the USA PG Economics reported:

Survey evidence amongst US organic farmers shows that the vast majority (92%) have not incurred any direct, additional costs or incurred losses due to GM crops

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having been grown near their crops. Only 4% had any experience of lost organic sales or downgrading of produce as a result of GM adventitious presence having been found in their crops (the balance of 4% had incurred small additional costs for testing only); (PG Economics "GM and non GM crop co-existence in North America", June 2004).

Since organic farmers represent only 0.22% of production, the percentage of farmers who experienced increased costs due to GM was less than 0.02%. A ratio of 3000:1 in terms of benefit over risk.

GM offers opportunities to improve the sustainability of our agriculture such as better nutrient uptake resulting in reduced nutrient leaching and reduced water demand allowing more water to stay in our rivers. With GM we have a real chance to control, even eradicate a number of our pests.

GM has the potential to deliver far more sustainability than the organics industry could ever hope to achieve. So why does the Green movement shun this new technology?

The answer lies in its development and control. GM technology is heavily regulated and therefore so expensive to develop that it remains the preserve of large companies and government-sponsored organisations. In their attempt to restrict GM use NGOs have put development out of the reach of small to medium size businesses, which are

the backbone of New Zealand's industry and innovation.

The Nuffield Council on Bioethics, in their report "Genetically Modified Crops: the Ethics and Social Issues", said that GM provided the opportunity for "local solutions to local problems". It is local solutions to local problems which will maintain New Zealand's agriculture at the forefront of biological production.

Excessive regulation and ultra precaution denies society of potential benefits in an attempt to eliminate all risk.

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Regards

Muriel Newman
(founder & director of NZCPD)

