

Newman Weekly

By Dr. Muriel Newman
17 December 2005



The New Zealand Centre for Political Debate

Local Government the New GM Battleground

Having been rejected by central government, GM radicals are now putting pressure on local councils to further their cause.

Their efforts come at a time when the government's Bioethics Council has recommended that animal to human transplants should recommence. These procedures used to take place in New Zealand, but following concerns raised about the techniques by researchers in Britain in the mid nineties, they were banned.

The Council's decision now opens the door for New Zealand science and innovation to play its part in developing treatments at the leading edge of transplant technology.

Just as electricity was a key driver of progress in the early part of last century, with information technology taking a lead in the latter part, it will be biotechnology that plays a key role in the future. According to Royal Commission on Genetic Modification, a body established in 2000 to consider the future of GM in New Zealand: "Technology is integral to the advancement of the world. Fire, the wheel, steam power, electricity, radio transmission, air and space travel, nuclear power, the microchip, DNA... Currently biotechnology is the new frontier." Just imagine if local councils of the 19th century had required everyone who applied a new science called "electricity" to obtain a resource consent!

The result was the establishment of the Bioethics Council, and a requirement that all GM applications be carefully examined on a case-by-case basis by the government's Environmental Risk Management Authority acting under the Hazardous

Substances and New Organisms (HSNO) Act. These requirements were in addition to regulations regarding biosecurity, medicines, animal products, agricultural compounds and food labelling.

Not content with the stringent regulatory regime imposed by central government and having lost their battle against science and common sense at a national level radical environmentalists with a GE Free mantra are now attempting to push their agenda through at local body level. Five councils – Waitakere, Rodney, Kaipara, Whangarei, and Northland with some support from the Northland Regional Council and Local Government NZ – have already spent \$75,000 on a report, peer review and legal opinion investigating ways to impose local government regulation on GM applications. The anti

GE radicals are putting pressure on local councils to become a regulatory authority, in addition to the regulatory authorities that presently exist.

If they succeed in their orchestrated campaign, then GE consents are likely to be decided on issues of politics and local constituencies rather than science.

Dr William Rolleston, the Chairman of the Life Sciences Network, a group formed to promote a scientific perspective on biotechnology, is the NZCPD guest contributor this week. His response to this anti-GE local body initiative can be found on the website Forum (www.nzcpd.com).

Genetic modification, a technology which alters the characteristics of living organisms enabling them to perform differently, was introduced into New Zealand thirty years ago, making a total mockery of the claims by green activists that this country could ever become 'GE Free'.

Major advances in the treatment of diabetes

were made in the 1980s through the production by bacteria of genetically engineered human insulin. Sufferers of cystic fibrosis, multiple sclerosis and human dwarfism have all benefited from similar technologies in which human genes are grown in bacteria. Similarly, a copy of the gene for chymosin, a protein enzyme from the stomach of calves, which has been widely used in cheese making since the eighties, is also grown in bacteria.

Potential benefits of GM in the future, include advancements in medicine, the development of disease and pest resistant crops to reduce reliance on agricultural chemicals, foods that contain essential vitamins and minerals and have greater nutritional value, the production of pharmaceuticals from plants, and better methods of controlling pests such as possums (leading to the eventual elimination of the need for 1080 poison).

In researching this article, I came into contact with an Idaho farmer, Duane Grant, who received an Eisenhower Fellowship in 2003 to study the difference in approach to GM between the United States and the European Union. In his report (click here to view) he noted that: "US producers have enthusiastically endorsed the biotechnology age. US consumers have given barely more than a polite yawn to claims by opponents of genetic engineering.

Today experts estimate that up to 80% of the processed or packaged food in the typical US supermarket contains at least one ingredient that is

derived from a genetically engineered source. European society has responded in a diametrically opposite direction – almost no GM crops are produced within the EU".

I asked him what progress has been made since 2003. He responded: "The EU is moving towards accommodating biotechnology at a somewhat glacial pace, but that movement is indeed occurring. Some polls are indicating a degree of 'crisis fatigue' amongst EU consumers, especially in the UK. I am cautiously optimistic that systems will evolve to allow reasonable trade in both conventional and transgenic products between the EU and her trading partners. With China, India and the western hemisphere largely aboard, any country that persists in nonsensical trade barriers is placing their future trade-dependant prosperity at risk. I believe the calmer heads in Europe understand this".

Dr. Muriel Newman is the director of the NZ Centre for Political Debate.

This week's online poll asks: Do you believe local authorities should become a regulatory agency for GM applications, in addition to the regulatory controls already imposed by central government?

"How involved should local government become in the regulation of GM science?"

Supporting the NZ Centre for Political Debate

If you enjoy reading Newman Weekly and value independent political discussion then I'm inviting you to consider becoming a supporter of the New Zealand Centre for Political Debate.

I'm confident the recently established NZCPD think tank will become an influential political force and provide a much needed independent voice on political issues. But life is all about reality and the NZCPD relies on the support and goodwill of others to continue. Contributions both big and small are most welcome.

The support levels range from a subscriber who receives Newman Weekly and has an opportunity to participate in our discussion forums, to those who would like to be foundation supporters or benefactors.

Thanks so much for your interest in Newman Weekly and taking the time to read this message. To find out more about how you can support us visit www.nzcpd.com.