

The Secretary,
House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Primary Industries & Regional Services
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am responding to your call for submissions regarding the Primary Producer Access to Gene Technology inquiry. Our organisation has considerable Experience in educating the community regarding the benefits of gene technology, while not avoiding legitimate concerns about it.

We believe that the public responds best when the facts are honestly presented in a form that is accurate and even handed. Because of the complexity of the concepts which underlie genetics and gene technology, some simplification is necessary, but not to the point where the layperson feels that he or she is being patronised.

Our area of expertise is scientific and medical animation, and we have produced a video series and CD-ROM on the principles of genetics, illustrating the principles with animation and examples from human medicine. These productions were aimed at the general public, so much consideration was given to the level of complexity required. The scientific content was formulated in collaboration with the Walter & Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research. The reviews indicate that this approach has been successful, so we would like to pass on what we learned from the project:

- * There is a reasonable level of scientific literacy in the community, and if technical terms and concepts are explained avoiding jargon and with some simplification, the essentials of genetic science and its use in primary production will be understood.
- * To explain certain concepts, such as the DNA molecule, base pairing, protein synthesis, recombinant DNA technology etc. it is extremely useful to use animation in any multimedia production.
- * It is important for the public to understand the safeguards that are proposed to protect biodiversity. The indiscriminate use of gene technology for commercial reasons, at the expense of wild species of flora and fauna is perhaps the biggest fear of the educated layperson, and provides the

most effective ammunition for the critics of gene technology. Less educated people fear direct toxic effects to themselves from genetically altered foods or animals.

* It is vital to engage the entire community in the discussion of the benefits versus the drawbacks of gene technology. Nothing undermines confidence more than the impression that those "in the know" regarding gene technology are keeping the knowledge, and its attendant risks, to themselves. This perception is unfortunately not an uncommon one at the present time, for it is true that although terms such as "genes" and "genetic engineering" are widely used, few people understand what they really mean.

* The public can best be educated through video, CD-ROM or television. The static nature of the printed word and image is such that a dynamic topic such as genetics cannot be done justice by literature alone. Of the dynamic media, CD-ROM is least widely used, although its use is increasing with the rising percentage of educational establishments and private homes owning computers. The CD-ROM format could be useful more to primary producers, who wish to examine certain topics in more detail, perhaps with an interactive component, while the video would probably be more suitable for senior high school or community presentations. The subject of gene technology could form the basis of an interesting and informative television documentary.

It is worth reiterating that our experience has been that the public will respond well when the facts are openly and honestly put before it, and when it feels that it is being allowed some say in what is being done. It must be properly informed about these highly technical matters, and the new media make this possible.

I would be happy to appear before the Committee to expand upon this approach to educating the public in the benefits of gene technology if so required.

Yours faithfully,

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