

16 June 1999

Ms Fran Bailey MP
Chair
House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Primary Industries and Regional Services
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ms Bailey MP

PRIMARY PRODUCER ACCESS TO GENE TECHNOLOGY

I refer to the recent call for submissions by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Primary Industries and Regional Services (the Standing Committee) for its inquiry into primary producer access to gene technology.

At its meeting of July 1998 the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Resource Management (SCARM) established a High Level Working Group on Gene Technology (HLWG) to:

- provide input to a gene technology strategy for Australia's plant, animal and natural resources;
- consider, on a holistic basis, relevant issues affecting the development and uptake of gene technologies including: regulatory issues relevant to risk assessment; consumer concerns; access to biological resources; market behaviour and restrictive trade practice matters affecting gene technology; food labelling; communication matters surrounding gene technology and commercialisation issues central to intellectual property arising from gene technology; and
- develop a paper addressing relevant strategic issues for consideration by SCARM's February 1999 Meeting.

Tasmania notes that several of the issues contained within the Terms of Reference for the Standing Committee's inquiry into primary producer access to gene technology were also looked at by the HLWG, and were addressed in its report to SCARM. I therefore wish to submit the attached copy of the SCARM HLWG on Gene Technology report entitled "Strategic Issues for Australian Gene Technology" to the Standing Committee for consideration. I would appreciate it if this report was treated in confidence, as approval for the dissemination of the paper beyond the members of the SCARM HLWG on Gene Technology has yet to be received from all SCARM member agencies.

There have been further developments in the area of regulation of gene technology since the completion of the SCARM HLWG paper. Australia also held its first Consensus Conference

on Gene Technology in the Food Chain. A report on the findings of the Conference was produced by the Lay Panel.

One of the major outcomes of this Conference relates to the issue of food labelling. The Lay Panel strongly recommended that all genetically modified foods, regardless of where modification occurs, should be labelled to allow consumers to make informed choices. It was further recommended that such labelling must show the reason for genetic change and any other information necessary for human or animal health advice.

This outcome has major implications for primary producers in Australia, because ultimately, the success of genetically modified foods depends upon consumer confidence in these products. Without consumer confidence in the products, the potential benefits of gene technology to Australian primary producers will not be realised.

The Commonwealth Government has announced that it intends to fund the establishment of the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator (OGTR) to be situated within the Department of Health and Aged Care. It is intended that the OGTR will be headed by a statutory office holder, and be supported by a small secretariat with staff seconded from other departments as appropriate.

It is intended that the functions of the OGTR will be to:

- regulate all aspects of the development, production and use of genetically modified organisms and their products, where no other existing regulatory body has responsibility, in accordance with principles agreed and enacted by all jurisdictions;
- work with other regulatory bodies to ensure the consistent application of standards and to harmonise assessments across all systems of regulation; and
- undertake or commission research in the area of risk assessment.

The Tasmanian Government is taking an active role in the negotiations surrounding the establishment of the OGTR and the legislative framework in which it will operate.

If you have any questions in relation to this submission, please contact Fionna Bourne by telephoning (03) 6233 6848 or emailing Fionna.Bourne@dpiwe.tas.gov.au.

Yours sincerely

(Kim Evans)
SECRETARY

Enc.