

## **Submission to the Inquiry into Primary Producer Access to Gene Technology**

The Biotechnology Task Force (BTF) was established in ISR in September 1998 to advise the Government on strategies for development of the Australian biotechnology sectors. The BTF is consulting widely with other Commonwealth Departments, State Governments, industry, research institutions, consumer groups and other stakeholders to ensure that all relevant factors are taken into consideration. The BTF will be absorbed into a new agency to be known as Biotechnology Australia which was established by the Federal Government to work closely with other Departments and stakeholders to develop a national biotechnology strategy.

### **The Australian Biotechnology scene**

While Australian biotechnology strengths include scientific excellence, an innovative research base, a strong intellectual property framework and access to resources with significant biodiversity, its contribution to the economy is inhibited by:

- limited early stage venture capital;
- investment sectors which lack biotechnology evaluation experience;
- a lack of large Australian-based biotechnology companies able to support commercialisation;
- underdeveloped public sector capacities for IP management and commercialisation; and
- a small domestic market for new products.

The immediate challenges to be addressed by Government are:

- access to development capital;
- IP ownership and management;
- regulatory systems for GMO release, food labelling, etc;
- technology development and clusters;
- commercialisation partners;
- public awareness; and
- access to genetic resources.

### **Biotechnology Australia—A Federal Government Initiative**

Biotechnology Australia (BA) will be a focal point for policy measures needed to facilitate the development of biotechnology in Australia. BA will report to a Council of five Commonwealth Ministers; The Ministers for Industry, Science and Resources (Chair); Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry; Environment and Heritage; Health and Aged Care; and Employment, Training and Youth Affairs.

The key tasks for Biotechnology Australia will be to:

- develop a national strategy for biotechnology;
- develop a public awareness program on biotechnology and gene technology;
- support training for developers and managers of intellectual property; and
- secure better access to genetic resources and gene collections.

The national biotechnology strategy will be completed in early 2000 after extensive consultation with industry and the community. The strategy will address several sectoral biotechnology

agendas, and staff from relevant government departments will be seconded to BA. Prior to these consultations, a Biotechnology Discussion Paper is expected to be released to focus attention on priority issues and to explore respective roles of government and private sector.

The Discussion Paper would include issues such as:

- R&D;
- Intellectual Property;
- Commercial development and finance;
- Regulation;
- Public awareness and confidence;
- Ethical issues;
- Human resources, education and training;
- Access to genetic resources;
- International regulatory and market access issues; and
- Sectoral strategies.

### **Public Information and Awareness**

Another key task for Biotechnology Australia is to support a public information and awareness program to help Australians understand the opportunities offered by biotechnology and the way potential risks are handled. Public support is a key requirement for adoption of biotechnology by industries, including agriculture. Government information and awareness programs need to provide balanced information to the public on benefits, risks and their management.

There is greater acceptance of biotechnology for medical application than food, the key factor in acceptance of GM foods being public confidence in the regulatory system and safety of the products. Overseas experience shows that where the public has confidence in product safety and regulation, such as the United States, there is broad acceptance of genetically modified foods. This is in contrast to the situation in Europe where public confidence in food safety and regulation has been eroded by events such as the bovine spongiform encephalopathy epidemic.

Primary producers will not and cannot adopt the technology if consumers will not purchase the end-products. Both Government and industry have key interests in delivering information and awareness programs, with the government's goal being to maximise the benefits of the technology for Australia. While there is general agreement about the need for generic information programs in support of the regulation regime, the science, and public confidence/risk assessment, the details for awareness activities should be based upon research into the information needs and attitudes of the target audiences. This research is currently being designed to assist the development of the public awareness strategy.