

Economics Legislation Committee
ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
Industry Portfolio
Supplementary Budget Estimates Hearing 2014-15
23 October 2014

AGENCY/DEPARTMENT: Commonwealth Scientific & Industrial Research Organisation

TOPIC: Genetically Modified Food

REFERENCE: Written Question – Senator Edwards

QUESTION No.: SI-75

1. Has the CSIRO conducted any polling on the public perceptions of GM foods or has it otherwise conducted or been made aware of studies into the same question?
2. Could you please table the results of any polling?
3. Has the CSIRO conducted studies into the benefits and health risks like carcinogens, allergic compounds, for example, for certain food groups? Could you outline the key findings? Has your organisation looked at the health risks associated with GM food material?
4. Is there a consensus in your organisation about the health impacts, if any, of GM foods?

ANSWER

1. CSIRO included a small number of questions on attitudes to GM food in a broader survey on food and health in 2010. The data was used internally to inform research approaches. Reports by several other Australian organisations have provided data on public perceptions of GM foods. For example, a report entitled ‘Community Attitudes Towards Emerging Technology Issues – Biotechnology’ was prepared for the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education in 2013. A report entitled ‘Public Opinion on Food Security’ was prepared by the Australian National University College of Arts and Social Sciences in 2012. CSIRO has not prepared a comprehensive list of such reports.
2. It would be inappropriate to table the data resulting from the small number of questions asked by CSIRO in the 2010 survey because the data was limited in nature, not subjected to peer review and was never prepared for publication. CSIRO researchers have conducted some related studies on novel food technologies, however these were not descriptive surveys of attitudes to GM foods. These have been published in journals such as Food Quality and Preference and the British Food Journal. One article which may be relevant to the question was published in 2007 in the Biotechnology Journal titled “Attitudes, values, and socio-demographic characteristics that predict acceptance of genetic engineering and applications of new technology in Australia” (lead author Dr Philip Mohr from CSIRO), see <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/biot.200700105>
3. CSIRO has investigated various classified or potential carcinogens in a variety of foods, however none of these foods were GM. The carcinogens included natural toxicants as well as packaging and processing contaminants. The studies were mainly focused on developing analytical methodologies for addressing questions related to consumer exposure. The concentration of these carcinogens was generally found to be well below the appropriate limits set by regulatory bodies. CSIRO has not conducted studies into the benefits and health risks of GM food material. We note that Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (FSANZ) is responsible for the regulatory processes covering food safety, food labelling requirements and the safety assessment of GM foods and ingredients before they are sold in Australia or New Zealand.

4. CSIRO's view is that the processes administered by FSANZ are the appropriate mechanisms for considering any evidence of the health impacts of GM food and CSIRO has confidence in those processes.