

Genetically Modified Organisms

AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN
GENETICALLY MODIFIED ORGANISMS
AGRICULTURE

Genetic modification (GM) is a technique that transforms the genetic composition of an organism. It allows particular genes, and their abilities, to be transferred across species boundaries by removing genes located on the chromosomes of one organism and splicing them into the DNA, or genetic composition, of another organism.

*“My approach on
GMOs is guided by
applying the
precautionary
principle to scientific
evidence”*

Senator Andrew Bartlett
Spokesperson on
Agriculture

Plant gene technology introduces a new gene into plant cells so that it becomes a permanent part of the cells' genetic makeup and the new gene is passed on to subsequent generations of that plant.

The Democrats believe plant gene technology may have exciting potential benefits from reduced plant breeding time to positive bio-remediation applications. But we must proceed cautiously, armed with full information, realistic expectations and public confidence. We need to fully investigate the potential long term health and environmental impacts of genetic modification before proceeding to full commercialisation of this technology. That has not been done to date.

The possible benefits of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) must not blind us to the need to take precautions before we commit to a GM future.

The Precautionary Principle

Scientific uncertainty + suspected harm = precautionary action

The Democrats were successful in amending the *Gene Technology Act 2000* to include the precautionary principle. When an activity raises possibilities of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken, even if some cause-and-effect relationships have not been fully established scientifically.

The Office of the Gene Technology Regulator (OGTR) came into effect in July 2001. The OGTR has been under increasing pressure over its decisions to release GMOs for field trials or commercial release during state moratoria banning the use of GMOs.

Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) is the Government body which checks whether GMOs are fit for human consumption. The Democrats, like the Public Health Association, are not satisfied that FSANZ research and testing regimes are sufficiently robust for GMO approvals. Reports from CSIRO, the British Government and the EU reveal significant problems with GMOs including:

- lack of adequate testing;
- failure to utilise best practice in risk assessment;
- new findings in relation to GMOs and soils;
- significant impacts on biodiversity in Britain; and,
- failings of the regulatory system in Australia.



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The Democrats Support:

- a strengthened regulatory framework controlling gene technology including a one-stop shop for gene technology regulation and environmental impact assessment of all GMOs;
- improved legal supervision of genetic contamination, including a strict liability framework that details who is liable for damage and removal of genetic contamination;
- substantially increased funding for research on long term health and environmental impacts;
- a community consultative committee of standing and funding equal to the technical advisory committee and the ethics committee;
- citizen juries to inform the public as well as represent the public's concerns about these new technologies;
- a wider application of the precautionary principles in terms of health and environmental effects before any GMOs are approved; and,
- approval by the Environment Minister under the federal Environment Protection & Biodiversity Conservation Act for all GMO environmental releases.

Consumer's Right to Choose

The Australian Democrats fought hard to secure improvements under the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Council (ANZFS) labelling regime for genetically modified foods. Under the new regime, labels are required where modified DNA and/or protein are present in the final food and the food has altered characteristics. However, the labelling requirements do not go far enough.

The Democrats support labelling for:

- highly refined food, such as oil made from modified corn even though there is no modified DNA or protein in the final product;
- all food using GM processing aids and additives;
- foods using GM flavours, even if less than 0.1% of the final food;
- takeaway and restaurant food using GM ingredients and prepared at the point of sale; and,
- all foods, including long life products already on shelves.

GM Free Zones

The Democrats recognise that States have differing industry bases and market advantages, and may choose to remain GM free zones indefinitely. We support individual States' continued choice to promote GM-free industries state wide via an opt-out provision in the Gene Technology Act 2000.

GMOs require effective isolation, risk management and independent assessment for environmental release. It is imperative that risks are both understood and minimised through ongoing independent public research and an appropriate regulatory environment so that the long term health and environmental issues are fully understood and the community can make informed choices about whether the technology is safe for commercial application.



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