

Biotechnology withheld by our State - Bill Crabtree, 3rd November 2004

MLA Clive Brown reports on Friday 29/10/2004 in the West Australian on Page: 2 that "A thriving biotechnology industry is part of our vision for Western Australia to be part of the global knowledge-based economy, and the WA Government is committed to assisting the industry's growth and development."

This sentiment is not consistent with the State Government banning proven-safe GM technology from our canola growing farmers. Agricultural companies have a choice where they invest their funds and they are on the brink of backing out of Australia. This would not be good. Canadian farmers grow most of the worlds canola (7mt) and it is 80% GM while we Australians grow about 1 mt of canola and there is a ban on GM (biotechnology) canola - yet both GM and non-GM canola are worth the same on the world market.

Those in the city may not be aware but wind erosion used to ravage the WA wheatbelt in the 1970's and 1980's, especially along the south coast where I grew up. Yet now with no-tillage technology (no ploughing of the soil, and seeding straight into stubble or organic matter) our soil is staying put. It is also more fertile and producing more grain due to increased organic matter retention, more moisture conservation and better time of sowing. Amazingly in the recent droughts of 2000, 2001, 2002 and perhaps 2004, we have seen good crop growth. We have been able to make the most of our most precious resource - water.

Most dryland farmers in WA have three big issues threatening their long-term viability; salinity, herbicide resistant ryegrass and drought. GM technology will help with all three issues. No-tillage itself will continue to heal the soil and help manage these three problems to some degree. However, for no-tillage to remain a sustainable technique, which is now 80% adopted, we do need GM technology.

GM canola will mean less atrazine in our Swan River and sub-soil, 20-30% more grain yield initially, less stubble burning, less green manure ploughing (which burns organic matter out of the soil) and no wind erosion. This technology is clean and safe, it has been approved by OGTR and Canada's 10 year massive country-wide experiment proves this. We are rapidly falling behind Canada.

My view is not 100% popular, but I am convinced it is the way forward for improved rural prosperity and responsible environmental land management. Yes, scientists are not perfect and technology has not always succeeded - but this winner, GM canola, is an easy pick. I ask Clive that you talk to MLC Kim Chance (Agriculture) and urge him to reconsider allowing farmers to use this clever GM technology.

Sincerely.

Bill Crabtree