

Review of Information Forums on GM crops in WA

By Bill Crabtree

Three GM information sessions were held in WA on the 4th, 5th and 6th of March at Dalwallinu, Corrigin and Dongara. At all three events Mr Scott Day from Canada was the keynote speaker on the “Impact of GM canola on Canadian Prairie Farming”. The first two events were debates and were chaired by Mr Grant Woodhams (ex-ABC presenter) and Mr Wes Baker (Chair of the Corrigin Farm Improvement Group [CFIG]).

A total of 240 people attended the three events, with 70 at Dalwallinu, 80 at Corrigin and 90 at Dongara. All events were held in conjunction with prominent local farmer groups, being: the Liebe Group, CFIG, and the Mingenew/Irwin Group.

The Network of Concerned Farmers (NCF) provided three speakers against GMs and Mr Bill Crabtree co-ordinated the speakers in favour of GM crops. The speakers against were; Mrs Julie Newman (Chair of NCF), Dr Phil Davies (Researcher) and Mr Alan Marshall (Lake Grace farmer). The speakers for were; Mr Bill Crabtree (Independent Consultant), Professor Richard Roush (Melbourne University), Mr Jeff Bidstrup (Chair of Producers Forum).

At the two debates a list of 30 questions were asked of each participant of which there was a 60% response. The questions were prepared by Mr Crabtree and were edited and added to by Mrs Newman. Nine of the 30 questions were asked before the debate to gauge peoples GM opinions both before and after the debates.

The average age of the attendees was 45 years and three quarters were farmers. 83% of people said the forums were good to excellent and 82% said the forums gave them new information. Those who attended represented a combined 320,000 hectares of farming land, of which 17,000 hectares is currently grown to canola or 5%.

Some 47% of people’s attitudes towards GM crops changed as a result of the forums. Two thirds of the attendees want the ban on GM crops lifted in 2008 or 2009, while 18% never want the ban lifted. If the ban on GM canola was lifted the area sown to canola would triple immediately from 5% to 15% of the farmland area represented by attendees.

Half of the audience believe that CBH could adequately handle the contamination issue to the 0.9% EU level. While three quarters of the farmers believe that they could handle GM canola volunteers on their farm. Some 62% of respondents thought the GM companies should be responsible for legal liability if GMs come in while 30% said the government should be legally responsible for denying farmers access to GMs.

From the open written responses there was a common theme that many attendees wanted to feel the community's mood on GMs and discover for themselves how strong the arguments were both for and against GM crops. Given that canola production in WA has dropped from 0.9 mt to 0.4 mt over the last 8 years the question was asked why some farmers had stopped growing canola. Some 57% who had stopped growing canola said it was because of low yields, 17% said it was due to low prices, 14% said it was due to poor weed control and 12% said it was due to no profit.

Of the main disadvantages of growing GM canola; 31% of the responses said there are none, 19% they had some health concerns, 14% said they were concerned about market impacts and 14% said they were concerned about environmental impacts.

The main advantages for growing GM canola were deemed to be superior weed management at 38%, better yield at 25%, less chemical use at 9% and better timeliness of sowing at 9%.

Press Release

Knowledge eases GM fears

Two debates on GM crops, last month in WA, showed that the agricultural sector was keen to witness the strength of the arguments both for and against GM crops. The Federal government sponsored three information events through the PGA and the WAFarmers who contracted Consultant, Mr Bill Crabtree to organise the events. The events attracted 150 people. Mr Crabtree liaised with Mrs Julie Newman to organise speakers against GMs.

Mr Crabtree said people appreciated being able to hear both sides of the GM arguments with 83% saying the events were good to excellent. Some 82% said the debates gave them new information and some said that they came just to gauge the public's mood on the issue.

As a result of the events half of the people changed their minds on GMs with the vast majority being less concerned with the technology as a result of hearing the arguments. After the event 65% of people said they wanted the ban on GM canola lifted by 2009 and the area grown to GM canola would triple if farmers were able to access the technology.

The events showed that there is still some concern with the technology. Half of the attendees believe that CBH could not handle GM grain segregation to the 1% level of admixture. However, 72% believed they could control GM canola seed on the farm.

Some 62% of responses said that chemical companies should be legally responsible for any losses that might arise from GM crops and half this number believed that the state government should be responsible for the financial loss farmers have experienced as a result of denying farmers access to the technology.

Of the main disadvantages of growing GM canola; most responses (31%) said there are no disadvantages to the technology, 19% they had health concerns, 14% said they were concerned about market impacts and 14% said they were concerned about environmental impacts. The main advantages for growing GM canola were deemed to be superior weed management at 38%, better yield at 25%, less chemical use at 9% and better timeliness of sowing at 9%.

Mr Crabtree said he was very pleased with the events. People respected one another's opinions while obviously having very different perspectives. The farmer groups [Liebe, MIG and the Corrigin FIG] were very helpful and in the end the attendees were the winners, seeing for themselves the strength of the arguments both for and against GM crops.