

Newman's motives revealed?

Letter to the editor –17th January 2010

Julie Newman makes more inaccurate GM claims in the Farm Weekly on 7th January. I was approached by Borden farmer John Stone to see if we could develop a frost tolerant wheat using GM technology. John was one of the three Directors for Green Blueprint which was set up for this purpose. John has been saying for over 10 years (to GRDC included) that frost is a serious issue that needs the best science to manage.

So the GM frost project was farmer driven and we intended to keep the project fully farmer owned as much as was practically possible. The purpose of the project was to stop farmers losing lots of money each year to frost. The project was not about making lots of money for the Directors as Julie asserts, but no-one can afford to work on anything for nothing for too long. Something I have been doing for too long now – my wife politely reminds me!

It should have been a great disappointment for all WA farmers who have, once again, been hit by frost, that this project failed to get up. I am sure some of Julie Newman's neighbours in Newdegate would benefit from having frost tolerant wheat. If successful we probably could have also put the Antarctic (not Arctic) genes into canola, lupins, peas, oats and barley. The genes have already been put in Arabidopsis and have been expressed (and published) – so there is significant hope in these genes. They are real science, with real prospects and we are not talking decades, but we were talking ground floor investment – with potentially world leading technology.

Currently this frost tolerance science is still sitting on the shelf, waiting for someone else to dare to have a go. Will it be the multinationals next time? I suspect so as farmers can't seem to get themselves together to do it for themselves and, in Newman's case, it is farmers fighting farmers on GMs. This technology is sweeping the world – next year corn will likely have 8 stacked genes in it. Come with me to the USA this August and see for yourselves (6 places left - Adam Gosling and Julie are welcome).

Actually Julie Newman confesses her true GM motives in a round-about way in her letter. As in Canada most canola grown in WA will become the hybrid lines - as they yield 15% more than open pollinated lines (which are 15% over TTs). These hybrids are similar to the Clearfield non-GM hybrids, which are becoming popular in WA.

Hybrid seeds can't be reused successfully the following year – unless you wish to forfeit 12% grain yield. So yes, the seeds will be purchased at your local farm supply shop – but not from seed works like Ms Newman's. Even the few open pollinated GM canola seed will be supplied by general farm suppliers and not seed works as Newman infers. So Ms Newman will lose business with GM canola.