

Response to GM concerns

GM canola has shown how powerful it will be for weed control and improved yields at the WA Crop Updates last week in many presented papers. Of the 380 people in attendance, which included leading agronomists and farmers, Department staff, interstate experts and some of WA's best scientists, the mood with GMs was: "it's about time we stopped talking about it and just got on with it." There were no dissenters on GMs at this most powerful agricultural event. This tone contrasts the regular paranoia that comes through the newspapers each week. So why is there such a contrast in views?

I think it is largely because people are scared of the unknown. They hear a thousand issues from concerned groups who are well practiced at concerning people. People are always cautious with new technology, especially when it comes to human health. It took 12 years for Pasteurised milk to be accepted – now it is appreciated for what it is: "good safe healthy technology for us and our children". Our children will prosper with GM technology; it will improve productivity and make farming more enjoyable.

Will GM canola yield more? It sure will! In contrast to the five severely droughted NVT sites, there are two sites of modest yields with some droughting, presented on page 185 of the Crop Updates. Here the Roundup Ready hybrid from Canola Breeders WA (CHYB-166) yielded 1.3 t/ha compared to Tanami at 0.98 t/ha. The same company owns and trialled these two good varieties. It was a droughted site and yet Tanami (TT) failed compared to the RR hybrid. Now 320 kg/ha of more yield is worth over \$150/ha and with the costs of RR end point royalty being \$12.50/t and \$3/kg for seed purchase. So, at a yield of 1 t/ha and 3 kg/ha seeding rate the cost comes in at \$21.50/ha. The maths are simple and this is one of the many reasons why there will likely be a 10-fold increase in GM canola in Victoria and NSW in 2009.

With regard to price, there is no difference! Today the 12.6 Mt record Canadian GM canola crop is worth \$CA444/t at Vancouver port, or \$A545/t. This beats my WA Geraldton port price of \$A515/t. Similarly Victorian and NSW growers were unable to secure a premium for non-GM canola, the GM growers got the same price. Sure there will be small niche markets with a small premium, but non-GM canola can also be grown 4 m from GM canola and will still be able to be sold as non-GM.

With regard to GM safety. GM feedstock is flooding into Australia every day, particularly with GM soy. This cheap GM soy meal is feeding most of the meats (pigs, chook, beef, mutton) that we all eat each day and it makes our meat potentially cheaper. Is this a concern to the general public? Is this a concern for the concerned groups that we are allowed to eat imported GM protein but we can't grow GM crops in WA or SA?

Are the concerned groups concerned about us cooking our fish and chips in GM cotton seed oil while we can't grow our own healthy GM canola oil for the same process? Is GM insulin a concern to the concerned groups, or any of the other 50 GM medicinal products that doctors prescribe to us each year? Is any respected and well published academic on the issue concerned?

It is time! So, it is time that the fear campaign which damages reputations and splits communities be seen for what it is. There are no dissenting respected scientists on GM canola, there are also no dissenting WA agronomists or leading WA farmers or their groups either. Those who have studied the facts and travelled widely agree GM crops will be helpful technology. The organic movement has a right to urge us to buy their organics – it makes them profits. So why should they deny us the right to trial GM canola that has a 14-year outstanding successful track record in Canada. So who is really concerned? It is time for change!