

Open Letter to Government 2003

From the Trustees, Members, Associate Members and Supporters of Physicians and Scientists for Responsible Genetics (New Zealand). Signed by 1891 supporters.

As members and supporters of Physicians and Scientists for Responsible Genetics, we are responsible and well-informed members of the community who take a reasoned approach to the GE issue.

Biotechnology has made important advances adding much of value to our scientific heritage. Only three percent of FRST funding for biological science goes to projects which will eventually lead to the release of genetically engineered organisms. Keeping genetic engineering biotechnology in the laboratory will have minimal impact on NZ research projects and the retention of scientific manpower and capacity.

We therefore urge you to reinstate the Moratorium on the release of Genetically Engineered Organisms into the New Zealand environment by amending the NOOM Bill.

Medical professionals would not countenance giving patients drugs which had not been extensively tested for safety prior to their release onto the market. Past disasters have demonstrated the risk of unexpected side effects.

However, what the Labour Government is proposing is to allow the ERMA to regulate release approvals. ERMA has generated a lack of confidence and credibility in its scientific ability from its inadequate past performance. We know that both the lack of experience with GE as a technology, and the commercial imperatives driving it, mean that the generally acknowledged risks are only the tip of an iceberg. Therefore the downstream effects of releasing genetically engineered organisms into the environment, or the food chain, remain unknown and may take decades to be discovered by science. The common-sense of consumer markets have factored this in and are rejecting GE produce. To protect the New Zealand environment ERMA has to be reformed to be truly independent and transparent, with independent scientific advice. It must operate under a brief that includes the precautionary principle of acknowledging unquantified risk and take into account the economic realities related to GE release.

To understand the GE issue one must recognise the incentives that have been driving the pro-GE argument. The PR campaigns of GE corporations, and the researchers and others they support, dominate much of the information that decision-makers receive. The GE companies are some of the biggest and most powerful in the world, their economies often rivalling those of nation states. This power enables them to extend their influence over many research, regulatory, media and political institutions, including our own. Their wealth has grown from their intellectual property rights over much of the world's industrial and technological production, with a simple formula of patenting and then producing chemicals, pesticides and drugs.

Now GE has given them the key to extend those same property rights into biology, including the world's food supply, through genetically engineering and patenting plants and animals. This ability to patent life-forms provides the potential for the direct control by these companies over much of the world's agricultural production and to levy royalties on farmers and growers production.

The potential profits are vast and the associated public relations campaigning, to bring the public and decision-makers on side, reflects this. For instance, the public are asked to believe that these companies are motivated by altruism rather than profit. The facts have revealed the misleading and unscientific nature of much of the pro-GE claims and the lack of research into the risks associated with the technology.

Even with chemical production methods, which can be tested in controlled laboratory conditions, there have been, and continue to be, many notable disasters, such as Thalidomide, Dioxins and PCBs. GE crop production will be in relatively uncontrolled conditions, in the open environment. As such they pose a future bio-security and health threat to all New Zealanders which has the potential to be even more unpredictable in its downstream effects than the commercial release of possums and rabbits into our environment over a century ago.

In fact, the risks of GE crops are judged to be so uncertain, by the GE production companies themselves and their insurance companies, that they refuse to cover them.

Incredibly, the Labour Government's answer to this risk is to 'socialize the risk,' i.e. to pass all the risks onto the people of New Zealand. Despite their overall lack of higher science qualifications, polls show that the majority of New Zealanders have used their common-sense and are strongly opposed to the release of GE organisms into their environment, even though many do not know the risk liability the government is planning to impose on them.

It is imperative to recognize that New Zealand's economy is uniquely vulnerable, in the OECD, to the loss of agricultural export and tourism markets. This is because GE release directly puts those same markets at risk. Relative to other OECD nations, our economy lacks diversity. It is, therefore, very significant that the premature adoption of GE in agriculture has led to some of the largest recent reductions in agricultural export markets internationally. Some of the affected export markets are those of Argentinean soy, Canadian canola and honey and US maize.

Likewise the loss of New Zealand's GE free status, would tarnish Brand New Zealand's 'Clean Green' and 'Pure New Zealand' images which support New Zealand's agricultural export and tourism markets generally. This is confirmed by a recent NZ Government-commissioned BERL report, which found that 20 to 30 percent (of consumers in major export markets) state they would cease purchasing New Zealand commodities if New Zealand released GEOs.

To put this in perspective, impacts of GE on agricultural markets, even without a calamity, could be compared to the effects of a 'nightmare' bio-security disaster. Overseas, GE market impacts have already caused hardship to farmers, many losing their livelihood. Studies have shown that the primary beneficiaries of growing transgenic crops are the companies producing them.

An independently organized, investigative visit, by New Zealand MPs to farmers in Argentina, the USA and Canada, would substantiate these concerns.

PSRG rejects the premise that a moratorium on releases of genetically engineered organisms into the New Zealand environment will have an adverse

effect on truly scientific research. The over-emphasis of research funders on genetic engineering molecular biology to the detriment of other approaches has long been in need of re-adjustment in order to preserve the local knowledge base that has been developed over decades within New Zealand's academic and other publicly-funded research institutions. The exciting new developments in molecular genetics research must now be incorporated into a wider view of biological knowledge rather than being pursued as an exclusive goal, as has been acknowledged by the leaders of the Human Genome Project. By doing this, our country will continue to make important contributions to humanity's legacy of scientific achievements.

We hope that you will take a common-sense, responsible attitude towards GE on behalf of the public. This means ensuring that GE organisms continue to be kept under the strict controls of laboratory confinement, where they can be used for research and medical purposes, and are not released into the environment or the food chain.

SIGNED by the Trustees and Members of Physicians and Scientists for Responsible Genetics:

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