

Done deals and revolving doors: the story of GM in Australia

Kath Wilson

Australians are famously early adopters of new technologies. Despite this, most of us are opposed to genetically modified (GM) food crops and are concerned about the multinational industries and lack of regulation surrounding these.¹ Every independent survey² of Australians' attitude towards GM shows a majority – including farmers, food manufacturers and major retailers – oppose GM food products.³

Yet the story of GM uptake in Australia is one of regulatory failure, industry done-deals, and a revolving-door relationship between industry and government. Multinational GM companies are firmly embedded in a complex of regulators, private and public research institutions, universities, public bodies, science education bodies, public relations companies and industry front groups. In *Edging Towards BioUtopia*, Professor Richard Hindmarsh describes the ways in which this network has created a “social agenda behind the development and regulation of genetic engineering” that “has been constructed or shaped to exclude public knowledge, debate and participation.”⁴

Faced with what it regards as a “PR war” against concerned citizens and public health experts,⁵ this GM complex has responded with tactics that include: regulatory measures that deny public access to information; systemic exclusion of dissenting scientists from public ‘debates’; public ‘reviews’ into GM whose terms of reference are so narrow as to exclude most arguments against GM products; industry push-polling to focus groups to achieve positive ‘results’; appointment of industry proponents on public advisory panels; and the shaming and intimidation of scientists critical of GM products.⁶

From the beginnings of GM regulation in Australia, pro-industry policy was a done deal. Before the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator (OGTR) was established in 2001, Australians' concerns centred largely around the inability to choose GM-free food. Virtually no imported GM foods were labelled as such, and the Howard government dismissed public demands for labelling with the claim that labels and compliance might cost three billion dollars a year.⁷ A Department of Finance and Trade report put a more probable case against labelling, saying it might limit “the competitive opportunities of GM food in the marketplace.”⁸ Put simply, the market wouldn't buy food labelled GM, so it was ‘uncompetitive’ to give shoppers a choice.

By this time, the seeds of government-industry partnerships were already sown – to the extent that by 2010 Monsanto would own major shareholdings in public-owned

agriculture enterprises,⁹ on top of its “links to over three quarters of Australia's wheat handling industry through companies like CBH, Cargill and Agrium.”¹⁰

By 1996, Australia's peak science organisation, CSIRO, had developed GM cotton with Monsanto's Bt transgenes, and this had been commercially farmed in New South Wales and Queensland. The only other GM crop grown commercially was the Florigene blue carnation. But this would soon change under the direction of the OGTR's first appointed head, Sue Meek. Meek was not appointed as a public-interest science advocate, but instead for her skills in «commercialisation of biologically-based ventures» and in «promoting the establishment and development of biotechnology-based industry».¹¹ At the time of her appointment, Meek held a position as Executive Officer of the South Australian Biotechnology Promotion Committee, and she remained a member of AusBiotech, an organisation “dedicated to the development and prosperity of the Australian biotechnology industry.” Advising Meek was Michael Leader, who had worked for AgBiotech and CropLife (the peak body of agriculture chemicals industry), and who would go on to advise Monsanto.¹²

The Network of Concerned Farmers (NCF) was among several public interest bodies who called for a parliamentary inquiry into Meek's appointment, arguing that conflicts of interest in the OGTR had meant they “ignore submissions, ignore advisory committees and misrepresent the legislation.”

But no inquiry was forthcoming, and in 2002 the OGTR granted the licensing of Roundup-Ready canola. The licences imposed no restrictions or conditions, such as buffer zones, segregation systems or monitoring regimes.¹³ Nor did they take into account health, safety or environmental risks. In Senate Estimates, Meek was asked whether the OGTR commissioned any research on the impact on Australian biodiversity of GM crops:

Dr MEEK: No, we have not.

Senator CHERRY: What research have you commissioned on the issue of human health effects of GM crops?

Dr MEEK: Directly, we have not commissioned research. Obviously, Food Standards Australia New Zealand does a lot of work in assessing food products.

Senator CHERRY: But they have commissioned no research either.¹⁴

Indeed, Monsanto, Bayer, Nufarm and other GM enterprises had little to fear from Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (FSANZ), the other principle regulator of GM food products in Australia. FSANZ has approved every GM application to date and relies almost entirely on GM company-provided data for its assessment of safety. It does not require the type of testing that has detected novel protein byproducts and consequent allergic responses to some GM foods, including a CSIRO developed GM pea. Professor Jack Heinemann, geneticist and former US National Institute of Health scientist, raised concerns that FSANZ does not “use the internationally accepted protocol for carrying out a rigorous scientific analysis”.¹⁵

Politicians and media, too, later reflected community concern. An *Age* editorial stated: “To ask Big Agribusiness about GM is a little like consulting Big Tobacco about the risks of smoking.”¹⁶ West Australian Premier Alan Carpenter said: “I find it unbelievable and unacceptable that the national food regulator relies principally on the say-so of the GM companies when assessing GM foods as safe to eat.”¹⁷

More recently, the Auditor-General criticised shortfalls in FSANZ’s adherence to its own standards, saying “either the information was not provided by the [GM] applicants; or FSANZ had not documented whether the requirements were met.”¹⁸

State government GM bans

Happily for Bayer, Monsanto and Nufarm, these concerns were ignored – and remain so. But the GM companies faced other regulatory hurdles. Responding to public opposition and resistance from key markets including Japan and Europe, Australian state governments adopted GM bans for marketing reasons. These bans were up for review in New South Wales and Victoria in 2008, and in Western Australia in 2010 (Tasmania, the Australian Capital Territory and South Australia currently remain GM-free).

With reviews of the bans looming, the GM industry mobilised. An army of industry lobbyists and industry-funded researchers and agronomists flooded the media advancing the case for GM crops and food, using rhetorics of progress, revolution, competitiveness and inevitability – and of ignorance, fear-mongering and anti-science sentiments on the part of objectors. With strategic precision, the GM sector also organised government and industry-hosted forums in rural locations. These framed public and scientific concerns as anti-progress and hysterical, and the pro-GM line as objective and vital for Australia’s economic and environmental prosperity.

Lending credibility to these rhetorics was Australia’s peak science body, CSIRO. Under the direction of Australia’s Chief Scientist Jim Peacock, who held patent applications on banned GM products,¹⁹ CSIRO fostered strategic partnerships with GM giants including Monsanto and Bayer. By the time the states’ GM bans were up for review, CSIRO had developed several GM product patents that depended

on bans being lifted for their commercialisation, and the biotech industry sought to “leverage” on CSIRO’s public trust to “confront” GM opponents.²⁰

CSIRO’s aggressive approach to GM promotion included letters to more than 50 high profile chefs who had signed Greenpeace’s GM-free Chefs Charter, urging them not to boycott GM food products. Its advocacy was chorused by an echo-chamber of lobbyists who claimed scientific ‘consensus’. Among these was the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), a free-market think-tank that campaigns against citizen-supported NGOs. The IPA is on record as listing Monsanto and tobacco, logging and mining giants as its funders.²¹ In addition to a flood of pro-GM publicity, the IPA organised parliamentary forums and industry events with hand-picked scientific panels.

One IPA forum, ‘How to beat activists at their own game’, toured Australia in April 2005 and was attended by federal, state and local government representatives, as well as Bayer, Graincorp, Nufarm (the Australian licensee of Monsanto’s Roundup Ready canola) and the Department of Primary Industries. Drawing on the teachings of RAND, a US military think-tank, the workshops coached participants in tactics to “beat” and “attack” citizens groups, including setting up rival faux citizens’ groups, or ‘astroturf’.²²

So it was no surprise that a network of new pro-GM ‘citizen’ groups emerged, including the Australian Environment Foundation (AEF), a group whose name could be confused with the genuine citizen-supported Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), but whose registered founders were the IPA’s GM campaigners Jennifer Marohasy and Mike Nahan; whose directors include the IPA’s Max Rhesse and Climate Skeptic Party president Leon Ashby; whose listed place of business was identical to the IPA address; and whose phone number is identical to that of the Victorian office of the logging industry front group, Timber Communities Australia.

The GM network extended its campaigns throughout rural media and regional speaker forums through the establishment of other organisations. One was the Producers Forum, sponsored by Bayer CropScience and Nufarm.²³ Another was Agrifood Awareness Australia (AFAA), an “industry initiative, established to increase public awareness of, and encourage informed debate and decision-making about gene technology.” Also mounting campaigns were Croplife Australia, Ausbiotech, the National Farmers Federation and the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC), which has strategic partnerships with Bayer and Monsanto.

The Age reported that the GRDC, “which imposes a levy of 1 per cent of gross sales on farmers, contributed \$100,000 a year to Agrifood Awareness... Agrifood Awareness executive director Paula Fitzgerald said the money was also used for workshops in gene technology run with the CSIRO ...”²⁴

In turn, Agrifood Awareness (AFAA) prepared the GM industry’s main lobbying document to overturn the bans.



By 2003 GM multinational interests had bankrolled their way into the heart of seemingly democratic bodies like farmers' federations. An *Age* report described a Monsanto and Bayer sponsored Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) meeting in Mildura, which took votes on lifting the moratorium "after a full morning session addressed by speakers from industry and government supporting the new technology",²⁵ Speakers at these forums and meetings included farmers on Monsanto's payroll, and VFF heavyweights directed anger and aggression towards farmers supporting the GM bans.²⁶ The report states that: "Searches of documents from the Australian Securities and Investments Commission indicate that [former VFF head] McGauchie's anger might have had as much to do with agribusiness as it did with agriscience and agripolitics... he shares with other VFF luminaries links to a variety of organisations with financial interests in the introduction of GM crops ..."²⁷

University and CSIRO scientists

To further 'leverage' on public trust, biotech marketers enlisted university and CSIRO scientists to sell the GM message.²⁸ This network projected increasingly inflated figures of improved crop yields and export markets for farmers and investors. By 2008, when the Australian Bureau of Agriculture and Resource Economics (ABARE) claimed that adopting GM crops – including GM wheat and rice – would benefit Australia to the tune of \$8.5 billion, the political news site *Crikey.com* was among those who pointed out: "GM wheat and rice aren't even available yet... ABARE admitted that the report was entirely hypothetical. However, that didn't stop Philip Glyde from declaring in a press release that "delaying GM uptake means we are forgoing significant economic benefits for regional Australia." [ABARE] represent, at best, consistently poor research and modelling. But they

are not without real world consequences, because they form the basis of long-term government policy."²⁹

Government modelling also relied on GM company profit (and crop yield) projections that were equally overblown. For its "wholly misleading representations about its profit capacity", Nufarm (the sole Australian distributor of Monsanto's Roundup Ready canola) was sued by class action for allegedly misleading the market.³⁰

Improved profits weren't the only inflated claims. Despite the expenditure of billions of dollars of public and private money over the past 30 years, the promises of commercial GM crop varieties with increased yield, drought-tolerance, salt tolerance, enhanced nutrition, a nitrogen-fixing grain, longer shelf life or other traits had not eventuated.³¹

In a bold public relations manoeuvre, this was spun by proponents as the very reason to revoke the bans. That potential GM traits took decades to develop, costing hundreds of millions of dollars with untold risks, meant that Australia should end the bans to encourage investors "with deep pockets and brave hearts" into agbiotech, argued proponents such as Glenn Tong. Tong who is chief executive of the Molecular Plant Breeding Co-operative Research Centre and has many GM company interests³² wrote in *The Age* that "Ignoring GM technologies would sentence wheat farmers to at least another 40 years of frost risk... it is in our best interest to minimise unnecessary barriers to investment such as state-based moratoriums against GM crops."³³

Although this network and its rhetorics failed to sway public opinion, it was apparent that lifting the bans were *fait accompli* in Victoria and New South Wales (and later, Western Australia). *The Age* reported: "[Victorian] Treasurer John Brumby and Premier Steve Bracks... regard the ban as running counter to the aim of making Victoria

an international hub for biotechnology. “They wouldn’t be in Boston (for Bio 2007) saying, ‘We’re going to extend the moratorium’, would they?” asks one Labor MP.³⁴

Indeed, while the public was assured of community consultation and a ‘review’, Bracks continued opening new multimillion dollar agbiotech complexes geared towards commercialisation,³⁵ and it was an open secret among industry insiders that the Victorian ban would be lifted.³⁶

Australian LifeScientist assured its readers in 2003 that “the Bracks government has quietly let it be known that it opted for the temporary pause to give the biotech industry 12 months to “make a noise”.³⁷

In May 2007 the Victorian government announced that an ‘independent’ panel would ‘review’ the bans. But the panel members’ pro-GM stances were already on public record. The terms of state reviews were economic, and farmers and other public had no avenue to submit legal, political, scientific, ethical, health or environmental cases against the lifting of the bans.

Markets withdrawing from GM

Even so, many people and organisations made submissions, and much evidence suggested there was market demand to stay GM-free. Worldwide, many markets were withdrawing from GM. The European Union was discussing the official withdrawal by the biotech industry of five GM foods and crops.³⁸ A report by DFAT warned that the economic impact of segregation could “have the effect of discouraging traders and processors from trading or using GM foods.”³⁹

But in 2007 it was announced that the Victorian GM canola ban would be lifted. New South Wales followed in 2008, and Western Australia in 2010. With the bans overturned, a resistant public had yet to be placated. A powerful behind-the-scenes GM proponent was (and remains) the Australian Science Media Centre (AusSMC), a public relations body that generates and gatekeeps many news stories. AusSMC was initiated in 2005 in Adelaide by Baroness Susan Greenfield,⁴⁰ also patron of the British Science Media Centre, an organisation accused by *The Guardian* of being set up “to promote the views of industry and to launch fierce attacks against those who question them.”⁴¹ However, criticism of AusSMC is problematic, as it is funded not only by corporate giants but also by most of the major media outlets to which it generates stories (including the ABC and commercial stations, Fairfax and News Limited) – as well as state governments and universities, making it ostensibly public-interest based and “free of bias” (as it claims to be).⁴²

However, many who serve or have served on the AusSMC advisory board are committed biotech industry proponents with industry links.⁴³ For example Professor Adrienne Clarke was employed as Victoria’s “biotechnology ambassador”; Professor Peter Doherty was patron of BioMelbourne, a body established to “promote the specific interests of the Victorian biotechnology sector”, whose

role is “progressing [sic] bio-business”, “connecting biotechnology, business and government” and playing “a specific role . . . as influencer [to ensure] influential input into the industry’s direction and development”. Professor Doherty regards those in support of banning GM crops as “a religious movement” nursed by the “chattering classes”. Sir Gus Nossal, who recommended the overturning of the Victorian GM ban, also sits on the advisory board.

When asked by *Crikey* why it only enlists pro-GM scientists in its media panels, AusSMC’s CEO Susannah Eliot replied: “The issue is so polarised it gets tricky to select a panel. Many scientists are happy to discuss the issues privately but aren’t willing to speak publicly because they don’t want to be labelled as pro- or anti-GM.”

Australian scientists are discouraged from airing their concerns about GM in many ways. The most urgent obstacle is a refusal by GM companies to allow analysis of patented products. As nutritionist and biochemist Dr Rosemary Stanton OAM explains: “Independent researchers have found it almost impossible to get GM seed to carry out safety checks and any farmer who buys seed is forbidden to allow it to be used for research purposes. Scientists who question the technology are marginalised.”⁴⁴

The issue has become so divisive scientists are intimidated. Those who question or criticise the claims made for GM technologies, or who urge a precautionary approach to GM products, can suffer huge personal consequences. An example of this was the sacking of Dr Maarten Stapper, a principal research scientist at CSIRO. Dr Stapper was reportedly “sceptical about claims that GM plants improved crop yields and called for more studies on the safety of GM stockfeeds”. He was subsequently sacked in 2007 after 23 years of service.⁴⁵ Dr Stapper said his sacking was because of his criticism of genetically modified crops. CSIRO reportedly “tried to gag” his criticisms and “bullied and harassed” Dr Stapper to “give up all my beliefs about good agriculture and keep my mouth shut about GM.” He is reported as saying: “I didn’t want that because I have a connection with the farming community and they trust me.”⁴⁶ Other scientists, including Patrick Fels and Dr Judy Carman, have suffered similar attacks.⁴⁷

This year, hundreds of senior scientists worldwide signed a petition stating that “The claimed consensus on GM organism safety does not exist”.⁴⁸ Despite this, untold billions have been spent worldwide in an attempt to support the GM multinationals, discredit opposing science and stonewall public concerns. GM products continue to be spruiked as “addressing global food security issues” – despite these claims being debunked by international development bodies. These bodies have long argued that development of GM food is motivated by the corporate control of farming, not by public interest.⁴⁹

Katherine Wilson is a freelance journalist and PhD candidate at the Swinburne Institute for Social Research.

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