



MEDIA RELEASE

1 October 2004

GMO's – CASE BY CASE, COUNTRY BY COUNTRY

Debate around the development, use and safety of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) is so polarised that perhaps we should simply accept that, as with the adoption of nuclear energy, some countries will and some countries won't.

So says Dr John Skerritt, Deputy Director of the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR). ACIAR is a statutory authority that operates as part of the Australian Government's development cooperation programs. The Centre encourages Australia's agricultural scientists to use their skills for the benefit of developing countries and Australia.

Dr Skerritt was speaking today on "GMOs and Society" at the 4th International Crop Science Congress in Brisbane. The Congress has brought together over 1000 delegates from 65 countries to focus on the key issues for cropping systems that provide food, feed and fibre for the world.

In a thoughtful, and thought-provoking presentation, Dr Skerritt discussed the major questions that have polarised debate on GMOs and society.

"Rather than making sweeping generalisations for or against the technology, we should encourage the establishment of international and national regulatory frameworks for consideration of the use and safety of each GM product so that each is considered on its merits," says Dr Skerritt.

Dr Skerritt says there is nothing new about this approach to assessing and evaluating the benefits or otherwise of products which are the result of new technologies like pharmaceuticals and agrochemicals.

"Conventional breeding of better-adapted, more nutritious crops has underpinned the supply of food for an ever-increasing world population," he said.

"But there is uncertainty as to whether such procedures can continue to meet this demand."

"We have to keep open minds, base evaluation and assessment on hard scientific fact, and armed with these facts encourage society to consider novel approaches to increasing food production if we are to keep up with world demand for food," he said.

4th International Crop Science Congress

ABN 90 094 380 560

26 September –
1 October 2004

Brisbane, Australia

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Dr Skerritt noted that while genetic modification has been one of the most controversial technologies yet introduced in agriculture, adoption of GM crops in developing countries is increasing steadily.

“There is actually a greater number of farmers in developing countries growing GM crops than in developed countries – a factor often overlooked by those who doubt the applicability of the technology to the poor,” he said.

Dr Skerritt says that the opposition to GM crops is confusing to many scientists, who through their training use reason rather than perception to come to conclusions and thus in some cases can be dismissive of social process and perceptions.

“While there is widespread acceptance of GM drugs, such as insulin, it is perplexing to many scientists that there is such significant opposition to GM food” he said.

Dr Skerritt said that the existence of good technology is not enough to assume adoption of it.

“The story of the development of nuclear power to generate electricity over the last 50 years may have some lessons for GM crops,” he said, citing its efficiency, its cleanliness, and its reduction in the reliance on fossil fuels and cheaper production costs.

However, there are obvious environmental concerns about nuclear waste. Many nuclear plants are coming to the end of their lives and public opinion means that in some countries no new reactors will be built.

“The two potential lessons from the nuclear experience for GM crop technology are that it does not follow that just by having a more efficient technology it will be automatically accepted – a factor often forgotten by researchers – and that quite different public policy approaches are likely to be adopted over the long term by different governments.”

“It is not unlikely that less developed countries with a greater demand for efficient food, fibre and renewable material production will lead the world in the extent of production of GM crops in the future,” he said.

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