

GENETICALLY MODIFIED ORGANISMS CONTROL AMENDMENT BILL 2009

Second Reading

Mr LLEWELLYN (Lyons - Minister for Primary Industries and Water - 2R)
- Mr Speaker, I move –

That the bill now be read a second time.

This is a bill of one amendment with a single purpose. The bill extends the expiry date of the Genetically Modified Organisms Control Act 2004 from November 2009 to November 2014. The extension allows the current moratorium on release of GMOs to the Tasmanian environment to continue for another five years. While the bill is simple, it is worthwhile recalling why this small amendment is important, and appropriate to the times.

By now members will be familiar with this Government's ongoing commitment to positioning Tasmania in the global market as a source of food that is genuinely GMO-free. By that I mean GMO-free, without the sort of qualification those who tolerate GMO contamination thresholds are forced to make. We want to be able to say with confidence that our food is totally GMO-free, not just mostly or probably GMO-free. The bill speaks directly to that objective because whether we achieve it or not depends significantly upon maintaining the legal basis for keeping the moratorium in place.

Is striving to remain genuinely GMO-free the right policy for Tasmania for the next five years? We all know this is not a straightforward question. It is still difficult to predict and put figures to potential costs and benefits of a zero-tolerance approach.

The type of costs and benefits can be described well enough. There may be opportunity costs associated with lack of access to GM crops. We can identify quarantine barrier costs in the form of inspection and DNA testing. It could become hard to source GMO-free grain and seed from the mainland due to ubiquitous contamination. However, while we can name these costs, quantifying them remains at best, a speculative exercise.

The same goes for estimating market benefits. We should not forget that some of these are already evident, and that a GMO-free stance is important to maintaining current advantage in several markets. However, additional benefits of being GMO-free are hard to quantify because demand for GMO-free produce does not yet outstrip supply.

Despite uncertainties over costs and benefits of maintaining the moratorium, one thing is clear. If the Government were to abandon the

moratorium now, the chance to realise potential market benefit of being genuinely GMO-free will be lost. There will be no going back. This is due to the sheer operational effort required to eradicate and contain GMO organisms, once they are released to the broader environment. We know this because we are still eradicating GM canola from former trial sites a decade after they were planted.

Therefore, it is entirely rational for Tasmania to continue to avoid a path that would accommodate lawful release of GMOs to the broader environment, until the future becomes clearer. There is a risk to this strategy of course. Other places may in the meantime establish new opportunities for themselves. They could achieve a level of market dominance that will be hard to challenge, if we later decide to use GMOs. There are however, ways of offsetting that risk, and some specific cases where open-air use of GMOs might be entertained on strict condition. These are detailed in the Government's updated gene technology policy. The policy clarifies how we intend to go about protecting and enhancing Tasmania's GMO-free market credentials between now and 2014. Members who have not already done so should read that policy, and see for themselves that it proposes a well-conceived and practicable vision for a GMO-free Tasmania. So these are the reasons for our stance at this time, and why it is right to continue with the moratorium.

It is true that there may come a day when contamination is so pervasive in seed and grain produced by our trading partners that we may have to rethink the moratorium. In this circumstance, the costs of maintaining zero tolerance may leave Tasmania with no option but to accept a lower standard, at least for some GMOs. However, that day is not here yet and it may not come at all. It would be premature to soften the current position into which considerable investment has already gone, especially as we move closer to realising the benefits of that effort.

This bill is necessary to realise those benefits. Therefore Mr Speaker, I commend it to the House.