

## Delivering Market Choice through Industry Participation in Australia

**SUMMARY:** In the face of concerns about the market impacts of growing biotech canola in Australia, industry stakeholders engaged in a unique participatory process to systematically review and work through all of the issues being raised. Together they identified practical measures that would ensure the Australian canola industry could continue to meet the needs of customers and consumers. They then shared this information with other supply chain participants, governments and the public to provide confidence that the industry could manage biotech canola in the supply chain and deliver choice.

When the federal regulator in Australia approved the commercial cultivation of herbicide-tolerant canola in 2003, biotech cotton varieties had already been grown in the country for six years. Yet concern from stakeholders, especially those in the grains industry, prompted several state governments to institute moratoria which effectively banned biotech canola for the next five years. During that period of time, industry stakeholders came together in a transparent process to address each area of concern and document all of the tools available to manage market and trade requirements. All of this was communicated to decision makers and the public and reinforced with coordinated issues management once biotech canola came onto the market in 2008.

### Facing market fears

Many canola farmers in Australia were looking forward to being able to grow herbicide-tolerant canola when it received approval from the federal Office of the Gene Technology Regulator (OGTR). Field trials had been conducted across the country for a number of years, and results indicated that technology could provide benefits similar to those enjoyed by growers in Canada, where biotech varieties produce over 85 percent of the canola crop.

However, stakeholders in the grains industry were more uncertain about the impact that growing biotech varieties of one crop – canola – would have on their ability to market non-biotech grains, primarily wheat and barley. Canola is one of the most globally traded commodity crops and any mixing of biotech with non-biotech grain



could potentially impact trade and customers. Marketers of wheat and barley were concerned that they would lose sales from important customers if even small amounts of biotech canola were to be detected in any Australian shipments.

These concerns were voiced loudly across all of Australia's canola-growing states: New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia. Although the crop had federal approval for cultivation, the states had the ability to restrict individual biotech crops based on market concerns, and that's what they did with biotech canola. Multi-year moratoria went into effect across the country, and some thought that biotech canola might never be planted.

## Building consensus in order to offer choice

But it wasn't over. Beginning in 2006, members of the grains industry started to regroup and think about biotech canola again, in part because time was running out on the existing moratoria. Decisions would be made to end or extend them in 2007. Many recognised that biotechnology would be important for their industries in the long-term, at least as an option their growers would want to explore, and didn't want those future choices taken away because of the canola situation.

Representatives from across the entire grains supply chain in Australia met together to answer two key questions: Do we agree that biotech canola has a role to play in Australian agriculture? And if so, what do we need to do to satisfy all of our different concerns and move forward in a way that doesn't harm trade, enables choice, is open and transparent and provides confidence to stakeholders?

The answer to the first question was yes, and subgroups quickly formed to address the second. One of the most complex issues concerned the ability of the grains supply chain processes to meet market requirements. The work in this area identified the various protocols, processes and practices available to segregate non-biotech grain from biotech grain throughout the supply chain. A 100-page technical document was published, detailing all the ways of managing canola (and other grains) at every step: technology and variety development, seed increase, on-farm production, storage, marketing and manufacturing of end products.

Although all of these processes and protocols were already available in Australia, many were previously known only to one part of the supply chain and completely unknown outside the grains industry. Cataloging them in one place and showing how they could be applied to biotechnology addressed concerns while building knowledge and

confidence within the industry that they could work together to give customers what they wanted.

After a year and a half of work, the grains industry statement "Delivering Market Choice for GM Canola" was released in 2007, endorsed by 29 key organisations including private companies, crop associations, millers, seed producers and farmers federations. The central message of the statement was straightforward and unequivocal: "The Australian grains industry has the capacity to deliver and manage the commercial introduction of genetically modified (GM) canola."

## Delivering the message

Having achieved consensus about how to move forward with biotechnology, the grains industry launched a coordinated effort to educate and build awareness with other agricultural organisations and state governments about their capacity to manage canola and their commitment to choice. They participated actively in public forums and made submissions in response to government enquiries. The moratoria in Victoria and New South Wales were lifted within the year, and growers began planting biotech canola in 2008. To date there have been no market or trade disruptions related to biotech canola, but the grains industry continues to work together to put their commitments into practice, monitoring and addressing any new issues as they arise.

The grains industry in Australia was successful in finding a path forward to commercialise biotech canola in a way that enabled choice along the supply chain, was open and transparent, and gave confidence to stakeholders. It was a participatory process that allowed all involved to express their concerns and work through them in a constructive way, with benefits for everyone in Australian agriculture, whether or not they choose to use biotechnology.

