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5.

appendix 3

Outcomes of Consultation: Submissions from the Public

Section contents

5.	Youth Forum: summary of outcomes	169
	Introduction	170
	Programme	170
	Issues for discussion	171
	Participants' views on the seven priority topics	172
	Medical and human health	172
	Environmental	173
	Economic	174
	Treaty of Waitangi	175
	Ethics and morals	176
	Political and legal	176
	Conclusion	177

5. Youth Forum: summary of outcomes

Introduction

The Commission held a Youth Forum to hear from young New Zealanders on the issue of genetic modification, as part of its consultation programme. The Youth Forum was held at Te Papa, Wellington, on 5 March 2001.

The day was designed to allow participants to hear a range of views regarding genetic modification and then discuss and report their own views. A workshop programme incorporating a role-play, brainstorming session and reporting-back session was developed. Details regarding the process involved in establishing this event are outlined in Appendix 1 (see “Youth Forum: the process”).

The meeting was facilitated by two independent contractors, experienced in working with young people. Ninety-nine youth attended, together with the Commissioners and the Commission Kaumatua. A transcript of the forum was placed on the Commission website.

Programme

The day started with the Commission introducing itself. The Chair said the Commission had attended a large number of hearings, received many written submissions and was holding the forum to hear young people’s views on genetic modification. He reiterated that young people’s views were important because today’s young people are the ones who will have to live with the consequences of whatever decisions are made in regard to genetic modification.

A role-play was conducted looking at different perspectives on the genetic modification issue. Ten participants selected to take on the roles of medical scientist, parent-to-be, international agriculture consultant, tourist operator, environmentalist, consumer representative, plant scientist, orchardist, church leader and iwi representative were provided with basic information about each persona.

After the role-play, the participants identified key genetic modification issues in the brainstorming session and then worked in 10 smaller groups to select their

priorities for discussion. The seven most commonly prioritised genetic modification issues were identified and participants spent the rest of the day discussing and reporting their views on these topics.

Issues for discussion

The issues identified by participants for discussion were:

- environmental
- cultural
- medical
- developing countries
- animal rights
- economic importance to New Zealand
- natural selection
- individual choice
- genetic modification in New Zealand already
- labelling food
- agriculture
- resources, natural resources
- who is making the decisions
- ethics, world view
- containment issues
- philosophical understanding of the issue
- testing
- effects
- genetic modification and the “soul” or spirit
- limits
- obligations under the Treaty of Waitangi
- overpopulation issues
- religion
- liability
- international competition
- international political obligations

- corporate domination
- secrecy
- human rights.

From the above list participants prioritised seven topic areas for each small group to discuss. These were:

- medical and human health
- environmental
- economic (including agriculture and developing countries)
- consumers and food (including labelling)
- Treaty of Waitangi (including cultural)
- ethics and morals (including philosophy and religion)
- political and legal (including restrictions, liability and who makes decisions).

Participants' views on the seven priority topics

The participants' views were tape-recorded and transcribed, the outcomes of their 'reporting-back' noted on wall charts and they also had the opportunity to contribute to a 'graffiti board' which was later displayed in the Commission office. Following are samples of the discussion to illustrate the breadth and depth of young people's thinking on genetic modification.

Respondents' use of "GM" (genetic modification) and "GE" (genetic engineering) is retained in the summary of responses. The responses have been lightly edited for grammar and style consistency but are otherwise presented as a series of quotations. These 'quotations', however, are not always the words of an individual but may present multiple responses grouped by subject matter, sometimes offering both 'pros and cons' of an issue.

Medical and human health

The medical and human health issues surrounding genetic modification were identified as the priority for youth. An articulate, informed and often personal debate was held on these issues. Points made included:

Does New Zealand really need genetic modification in health? There will be some health benefits to a small number of people, but what about the effect on the environment and other people? There is a tension between curing people and doing what you can to save lives — after all, people have to die some time. There will be less need for antibiotics if genetic modification is used in health.

Genetic modification is a ‘technocentric’ approach — in the past more complex diseases have been created by ‘pill fixes’. We should look more at the causes of diseases such as cancer.

Everyone has good intentions regarding genetic modification, but who will actually be able to afford it? Won’t it be used for things like biological warfare instead of for good? Should the Olympics be ‘GM-free’ in addition to ‘drug-free’?

Genetic modification in health is a personal choice issue. Without genetic modification in New Zealand, people with diabetes will have to move to other countries.

Will humans become susceptible to animal diseases if they have genes implanted in them?

Genetic modification has potential; there should be more research so we can fully understand it.

There should be compulsory standards and codes for genetic modification.

It would be bad if in the future it became in vogue to genetically modify your children. Genetic modification may mean that people in same-sex relationships can have their own children.

Environmental

Debate on environmental issues by youth was equally spirited, with the following points being raised:

Genetic modification is another example of humanity looking for quick and simple fixes for things. Let’s think creatively about answers to the problems genetic modification is trying to solve — as we know from the case of health, alternative medicines can be used which have fewer side effects.

Because we do not know what may happen through introducing genetic modification; we cannot plan for it. Many mistakes have been made in the past, so let’s wait and see with genetic modification. If we make crops all the same, then one disease could wipe them all out.

Already food contains too many unknown things; adding genetic modification will simply make it worse.

The chances are that genetically modified crops will get into and move up the food chain through cross-pollination and then damage the environment.

The ultimate environmental cost of using genetic modification technology is not currently factored into the price of genetic modification products.

Because many of our plants and animals are unique they need to be protected; already, imported species have caused major problems.

Natural selection already modifies genes anyway and endangered species could be saved. But shouldn't we be trying to prevent extinction rather than trying to bring back extinct species?

Genetic modification may help reduce problems with horticultural sprays and nitrogen-related soil and water pollution, but it may not always result in a reduction in pesticides. Marginal land may be able to be saved because of better yields from genetically modified crops.

Economic

Youth selected economic issues surrounding genetic modification, including its usage in agriculture and in developing countries, as their third priority to discuss. The tourism and organic produce markets were identified as major players in the economic debate. Issues raised included:

Introducing genetic modification will destroy New Zealand's 'clean green' image. If we stay GM-free, and everyone else in the world is selling it, we will always have a market for our GM-free food and an economic advantage. We need to do something to stop other countries sending genetic modification products here.

New Zealand agriculture has always remained up to date with technology, why not do this with genetic modification? If we are going to go genetic modification, we should jump right in and attract investment from research companies early on.

The organic market is just starting in New Zealand and will be overrun by cheaper genetic modification food if it is introduced. You cannot claim that you are producing organic food if there is any genetic modification production nearby. All of New Zealand's agricultural production would be threatened by genetic modification cross-pollination.

If we don't introduce genetic modification and just wait and see, in 20 years' time we can always go GM if we want to. Decisions should not just be market-driven.

There are other ways of helping developing countries, apart from genetic modification; for instance, our growing more food for them. People in developing countries should be given the choice as to whether they want genetic modification or not. Genetic modification won't cure world starvation; poor countries will not be able to afford genetically modified food.

New Zealand is too small to do its own thing; we will have to follow the lead of larger countries. With economic globalisation, it will be hard to keep New Zealand GM-free.

Consumers and food

Food, consumers' right to choose and the labelling of food containing genetically modified components were also raised as issues. Again, the risk of the unknown

was also identified. Following are samples of some of the responses:

As a country, we need to have control over what goes into our food supply. We can't ban genetic modification food, we can only hope to control it.

Because genetic modification's long-term effects are unknown, we should be careful and not rush in so fast that we can't back out of it.

There should be good labelling because people have the right to informed choice when deciding what they want to eat. This is particularly important for vegans and people with allergies. There should also be consumer education. However, how far we should go in labelling is a complex question; for example, what about milk from cows that have eaten grass that may have been genetically modified?

We need to decide what price we are willing to pay for this new technology.

If genetic modification develops a thicker-skinned fruit, won't larger bugs just develop?

Isn't putting human genes in our food like cannibalism?

It is a mistake to think of genetic modification as 'putting pieces of animals into fruit' as it only consists of rearranging the order of the natural chemical bases within DNA.

Genetically modified food is cheaper and looks better. When apples are sprayed now, you end up eating dead bugs. We are already eating preservatives, so genetic modification couldn't be any worse. However, it is not a good argument to just say that, because what we eat now is bad, genetic modification could not be worse.

Treaty of Waitangi

The role of the Treaty of Waitangi in the genetic modification debate and cultural issues were also raised by youth. Samples of some of the comments made follow:

New Zealand is not multicultural in a political sense, it is a 'bicultural' country with the relationship being between Maori and Pakeha.

The Treaty is a political relationship, how do we respect Maori views on genetic modification, which we believe to generally be negative? The Treaty debate needs to be more than just finding out what Maori want and doing it.

Genetic modification is not a Maori/Pakeha issue: it is an ethics issue. Each individual's views should be respected. Not all Maori are for or against genetic modification.

We need to have ground rules that apply to all cultures to stop one culture just going and cloning lots of itself.

If they are successful, Treaty of Waitangi claims may make it difficult to do genetic modification in the future.

Ethics and morals

Youth debated the ethics and morals surrounding genetic modification including aspects of religion and philosophy. Some of the issues raised included:

Everyone's views should be heard on the genetic modification issue.

Just because we can use genetic modification, should we?

What will our children's ethics be regarding genetic modification? Their views should be given more weight than ours; we shouldn't make decisions for generations to come.

Why put animals' rights below ours? Animals are not commodities to be experimented on. Anyway, rats are different from people, therefore experiments on rats are not useful. If it is not ethical to test on animals, then how should we test things? It is better to test things on animals than on humans.

Non-religious people are for genetic modification because they want to live longer and religious people are against it because they are not afraid of dying. We are constantly trying to prevent nature from taking its natural course. But people need to die; we should not be cloning people when overpopulation is a problem. We are still feeling the effects of atomic radiation; genetic modification may be dangerous and it may take a long time to find out.

If you had a disease would you use a genetically modified product?

Political and legal

While the political and legal issues surrounding genetic modification was the last of the top seven priorities, discussion was extensive and included reference to restrictions, liability and who actually makes the decisions. Samples of the debate are included below:

Not everyone will agree on the genetic modification issue; that is the nature of majority government. If the majority is wrong, don't we have a duty to do what is right?

The Green party is only three to five percent of the vote, but in the end the majority will win. But green ideas are growing and the Greens are not the only ones against genetic modification. Consumers have already spoken out against genetic modification, and politics is about power and people pressure — people saying 'no'.

We should not let a small number of people control what happens, for example, seeds being produced that have the ability to 'turn off' after a period of time. Anyway, the Americans can just determine our policy such as labelling.

We also have obligations under the World Trade Organization.

The biotechnology companies want to get rid of organics.

There are always problems with any new invention. Any codes and regulations need to be tested. If genetic modification is used for warfare and we don't know anything about it, we won't be able to protect ourselves.

There will be huge problems if people with illnesses have to get their drugs from overseas.

Government should provide better knowledge to educate the public. People need to form an opinion and take a side in the debate. Some people just don't have enough information.

Conclusion

As expected, the participants in the role-play rose to the occasion and clearly articulated the diversity of views on the issue. Participants then identified the issues they wished to discuss in small groups. (Small groups were considered the most appropriate method of working with the young participants because it encouraged all participants to speak and provided opportunities for informal discussion.)

The Youth Forum reported a diversity of views amongst young people in regard to genetic modification. The issues and views provided at the Youth Forum reflected those collected from the adult community in the Commission's broader consultation programme. The order of priority given to the issues, however, differed in that youth addressed medical, human health, environmental and economic issues before the issues of consumer choice and food.

The Commissioners thanked the participants for their well-informed discussion and commented that they were better informed on the subject than the older generation. They said that some of the questions which the participants found difficult, the Commission had also found difficult, and that the questions participants thought important were the same as those raised in the wider discussions. The Commissioners said the energy and diversity of the participants was impressive and highlighted that there were massive issues to deal with, ranging from insulin production right through to human cloning.

The Commissioners said the Youth Forum continued the debate that they had been hearing around the country and they were continuing to investigate whether there were areas where genetic modification techniques could be used and those where they should not be used. The Commissioners noted that, while they had had a year to discuss this issue and come to terms with it, in one day the youth participants had raised most of the issues the Commission had been thinking about.