

Executive summary

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Genetic modification has been used freely in New Zealand for more than a decade as a research tool, for medical purposes, and in food ingredients. It holds exciting promise, not only for conquering diseases, eliminating pests and contributing to the knowledge economy, but for enhancing the international competitiveness of the primary industries so important to our country's economic well-being.

Our consultations with the people of New Zealand showed that, while most were comfortable with genetic modification for medical purposes, many strongly opposed other uses. Many of the submissions to the Commission focused substantially on food and crops. They stressed that the safety and certainty of the science have yet to be proved, reflecting the fact that, at least for the moment, world consumer preferences are against use of genetic modification in food. First-generation genetically modified crops have shown few obvious benefits for consumers.

Our major conclusion is that New Zealand should keep its options open. It would be unwise to turn our back on the potential advantages on offer, but we should proceed carefully, minimising and managing risks. At the same time, continuation of the development of conventional farming, organics and integrated pest management should be facilitated.

The major theme of the Report is Preserving Opportunities. Our recommendations aim to encourage the coexistence of all forms of agriculture. The different production systems should not be seen as being in opposition to each other, but rather as contributing in their own ways to the overall benefit of New Zealand.

Our inquiry has looked closely into the existing institutional structures dealing with the technological issues that arise. Although some suggestions for enhancement are included among our recommendations, we are satisfied that the basic regulatory framework is appropriate and that the key institutions, the Environmental Risk Management Authority (ERMA) and the Australia New Zealand Food Authority (ANZFA), carry out their functions conscientiously and soundly.

Debate on genetic modification issues in this country is made unique by the partnership between tangata whenua and tangata tiriti created by the Treaty of

Waitangi. The values held by Maori add special emphasis to the ethical and cultural objections many people have to the new technology. In our extensive consultation with Maori, and throughout the Commission's deliberations, we have given much thought to the values New Zealanders hold, to find a sound base for the findings we are now required to make. It became clear that the existing regulatory bodies were not best equipped to address issues of this kind, so one of our recommendations is to set up a separate specialist body, Toi te Taiao : the Bioethics Council, so that these matters can be debated.

We were also convinced that New Zealand needs a strong overall biotechnology strategy, to guide us in the use of all new technologies in this field. As an allied consideration it will be important that a single, independent institution undertakes the general auditing of biotechnological applications, and promotes public education about the new technologies. To this end we have recommended the establishment of a Parliamentary Commissioner on Biotechnology, modelled on the successful precedent of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment.

We envisage that future uses of genetic modification will continue to require rigorous assessment by ERMA before approval. One detail whereby the Commission considers the existing processes could be improved is an addition to the approval types now available. We are recommending a new category, conditional release, where the use of a genetically modified organism can be made subject to terms and reporting back, as a further assurance of safety and to enhance the management of risk.

Technology is integral to the advancement of the world. Fire, the wheel, steam power, electricity, radio transmission, air and space travel, nuclear power, the microchip, DNA: the human race has ever been on the cusp of innovation. Currently, biotechnology is the new frontier. Continuation of research is critical to New Zealand's future. As in the past we should go forward but with care.

Carrying out a full consultation process and preparing a comprehensive report within the space of a year has meant a period of intense effort for the Commissioners and staff. It has also asked much of those who wished to make presentations to us. We gratefully acknowledge all who have contributed.