

section 3.15 |



appendix 2

Outcomes of Consultation: Submissions from Interested Persons

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3.15 Areas of public interest: an introduction

The Warrant under item (j) invited submissions on “the main areas of public interest in genetic modification, genetically modified organisms, and products”. Four main areas were identified in the Warrant:

- (i) human health (including biomedical, food safety, and consumer choice):
- (ii) environmental matters (including biodiversity, biosecurity issues, and the health of ecosystems):
- (iii) economic matters (including research and innovation, business development, primary production, and exports):
- (iv) cultural and ethical concerns

Approximately half of the Interested Persons (58 submitters) made substantial comment on this item. A majority of this group (38 submitters) were rated as being ‘strongly for’ or ‘tending to be for’ genetic modification. Of the remainder, 18 submitters were classified as being ‘strongly against’ or ‘tending to be against’ genetic modification.

Comment on these public interest issues came mostly from industry associations or networks (19 submitters) and research organisations (11 submitters), as well as other advocacy groups (six submitters) and private companies (five submitters).

A majority of Interested Persons commenting on this item (33 submitters) had an economic or production sector background, six had an environmental focus, five had a cultural and ethical background and three had a health background. The remaining 11 submitters came from other backgrounds, such as governance and intellectual property.

Issues of public interest were a significant focus of many submissions. Throughout all submissions the number of submitters identified as making substantial comment on these issues were: economic issues (53 submitters), health issues (41 submitters), environmental issues (35 submitters), ethical issues (20 submitters), Maori cultural issues (21 submitters), other cultural issues (four submitters) and spiritual issues (four submitters).

Submitters' comment is discussed in the following sections under the headings detailed in the Warrant:

- human health
- environmental matters
- economic matters
- cultural and ethical concerns.

However, the Warrant item on areas of public interest also elicited more conceptual representations on genetic modification, including wide-ranging issues of understanding, acceptability and choice.

Information, acceptability and choice

Many of the general comments offered on this Warrant item reflected various strategic issues previously raised (see section "Strategic issues"). Submitters presented issues of information, acceptability and choice, with specific comment centring on:

- the public's need for education on the issues
- the public's right to know where genetic modification was used
- the public's right to choose
- the public's opportunity for exercise of choice.

In brief, most comments:

- emphasised the need for further public education on genetic modification
- supported the basic right for consumers to know what products, and what technology, involved genetic modification
- supported the public's right to choose whether certain products, or processes, should be consumed or used
- supported the public's ability to exercise an informed choice.

Of these, the need for public education and the public's right to know and right to choose are included here because they span several of the areas of public interest as well as other aspects of genetic modification. Exercise of choice is discussed here only briefly: it is covered later in more detail in relation to food safety, consumer choice and food labelling (see section "Areas of public interest: human health").

Need for public education on issues

Many people took the opportunity under Warrant item (j) to mention the lack of public understanding of issues and the need for more public education. Overall, 23

of the total number of Interested Persons noted specific concerns about public education on genetic modification. They included industry networks and associations, research organisations and Maori groups. Most of these submitters favoured use of genetic modification technology: 10 were ‘strongly for’ and five ‘tending to be for’ genetic modification.

Several submitters cited lack of public understanding of the benefits of genetic modification as an issue. National Testing Centre [IP44] noted:

... the public in New Zealand and other places are often ignorant of the facts of human biology and genetics ... Time magazine (7 August 2000) quotes that in a recent poll, 35% of Europeans agreed with the statement “Ordinary tomatoes do not contain genes, while genetically modified tomatoes do.”

New Zealand Life Sciences Network [IP24] had similar concerns. It commented that:

Perceptions rather than facts heavily influence opinions about GM products. ... Real public interest lies in being able to continue to do the research.

Lysosomal Diseases New Zealand [IP99] stressed “fear of the unknown” and the “absence of good information”.

The public’s right to know

Comments upholding consumers’ right to know what products and what technology involved genetic modification had wide sectoral support, including that of biotechnology companies, industry associations and religious groupings. Typical of views presented were the following comments:

- “We believe consumers have the right to know what they are purchasing” (DuPont [IP1]). (DuPont also advocated “informed consumer choice through meaningful information and product assurances”.)
- “Consumers have a right to know what they are buying when they go to the supermarket, and farmers have a right to know what they are planting in their fields” (Nelson GE Free Awareness Group [IP100], quoting from a press release of October 2000).

Under the general heading of “public education, consultation and choice”, Monsanto [IP6] noted that it supported “the right of the general public to be consulted on important issues” and that “it is essential that the public is well informed and that an appropriate organisation is resourced to present issues”. Monsanto maintained that “the individual must have sufficient information for freedom of choice”.

The public's right to choose

Submitter comment on consumers' right to choose was noted by submitters such as Grocery Manufacturers Association [IP54] which argued: "It is essential that appropriate information about the GM status of food is available as consumers must have the right to choose what food they consume." Similarly, Quaker Spiritual Ecology Group, Religious Society of Friends [IP50] stated that "consumers have a right to choose the food they eat".

New Zealand Catholic Bishops' Conference [IP38] commented on safeguarding the rights of individuals to make choices, stating that mechanisms were available "to ensure that those who do not wish to eat GM food can avoid doing so, while not depriving others of their right to choose GM foods if they are considered to confer an advantage".

Although the issue of choice had wide application, most submitters commented on this matter in terms of foodstuffs. The opportunity to exercise choice in purchase of food through adequate product labelling is discussed in "Areas of public interest: human health".

The public's exercise of choice

Given the right to choose, the public then need to be given the opportunity to exercise that choice. This requires that adequate information be available for people to understand the issues (as discussed above) and, in the case of traded goods, that products be appropriately identified.

Issues of food safety elicited a very high level of response in all representations to the Commission. In terms of comment on exercise of choice, most offered in submissions from Interested Persons focused on the purchase of foodstuffs and adequate product labelling. This is discussed later (see "Areas of public interest: human health").