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Western Australia Gives Growers GM Canola Choice

CropLife Australia welcomes today's announcement by the Western Australian Agriculture Minister Mr Terry Redman that WA growers will be able to choose whether they wish to grow genetically modified (GM) canola in 2010. About half of the area planted to canola each year in Australia is in WA.

The decision comes nearly seven years after the federal Gene Technology Regulator deemed that two types of GM canola were safe for the environment and for human health. The conclusions about the safety of GM canola have been echoed by regulatory authorities from around the world and by international bodies such as the World Health Organization. WA now joins New South Wales and Victoria in allowing its farmers to choose whether they wish to plant GM crops.

In 2007, the University of Melbourne estimated that the effect of replacing 50% of triazine-tolerant canola and 40% of conventional canola in WA with GM canola would increase yields by 8%, canola plantings by 100,000 hectares and wheat production by 40,000 tonnes. In total, these effects were estimated to be worth \$74 million to WA farmers each year.

The CEO of CropLife Australia, Ms Paula Matthewson, said that today's announcement meant that farmers in WA would have another innovative tool to help them increase productivity in some of the toughest farming conditions in the world.

"On the eve of Australia Day it is worth remembering that innovation has always been the backbone of Australian agriculture. Nowhere is this truer than in Western Australia, where farmers have a history of producing abundant food in extremely difficult conditions. The adoption of innovative cropping strategies in Australia, such as minimum tillage, happened first in WA. GM canola will greatly increase the flexibility of farmers in applying these techniques."

Ms Matthewson also highlighted that there are no market access issues for GM canola, despite the repeated claims of activist groups. "Japan is the world's biggest importer of GM canola, with an annual requirement of approximately 2.3 million tonnes," Ms Matthewson said. "Japan imports four times as much GM canola from Canada as non-GM from us, but for the same price. They then mix the non-GM canola and GM canola together before processing it into canola oil. Other countries such as China, Korea and Bangladesh are also big importers of GM canola and will present great export opportunities for Western Australian producers. Australian GM canola also has approval for import to Europe.

"As the developers and providers of crop biotechnology products, CropLife's members are assisting Australian farmers to be responsible stewards of GM crops. Our members do so by providing farmers with the information and knowledge they need to successfully and sustainably produce GM canola well into the future.

"CropLife is also confident that this stewardship will be replicated throughout the grains commodity supply chain," Ms Matthewson said. "Australia has a professional, mature and sophisticated supply chain well equipped to deliver both GM and non-GM canola to meet customer needs".

The decision by the WA Government means that the only canola producing state that maintains a moratorium on commercial planting of GM canola is South Australia. This is despite an independent review, commissioned by the SA Government, recommending that the moratorium be lifted in 2008.

"The South Australian Government owes its farmers a logical explanation of why it continues to ignore the advice it requested regarding GM crops. This stance denies South Australian farmers access to a crop that is now available in every other canola producing state in Australia" Ms Matthewson concluded.

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Contact

Bernard Meadley,
Acting Chief Executive Officer,
CropLife Australia Limited
Ph: 02 6230 6399
Mobile: 0419 436 331