



Foreign Agricultural Service

**GAIN Report**

Global Agriculture Information Network

Voluntary Report - public distribution

Date: 2/8/2000

GAIN Report #CA0011

## **Canada**

### **Biotechnology**

#### **Future of Biotechnology in Canada - New Expert**

#### **Scientific Panel**

**2000**

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#### **Report Highlights:**

The Government of Canada (GOC) will establish a new "arms-length" expert panel to examine anticipated scientific developments in food biotechnology and assess the scientific requirements of the regulatory system to meet the growing complexity of food biotechnology. The panel, which will be completely independent of the GOC, could make far reaching recommendations to alter the regulatory framework for GM-food safety - possibly including a move toward a "process-oriented" regulatory regime for genetically modified organisms similar to that evolving in Australia and New Zealand.

## **"Future of Food Biotechnology in Canada - New Initiative May Bring Changes"**

### **Summary**

The Government of Canada (GOC) will establish a new "arms-length" expert panel to examine anticipated scientific developments in food biotechnology and assess the scientific requirements of the regulatory system to meet the growing complexity of food biotechnology. This is part of the GOC's attempt to bolster consumer confidence in the regulatory process in the wake of Greenpeace's anti-genetically modified organism (GMO) campaign and the announcement by some food processors and producer associations that they will not process or grow genetically modified foods. The panel, which will be completely independent of the GOC, could make far reaching recommendations to alter the regulatory framework for GM-food safety - possibly including a move toward a "process-oriented" regulatory regime for genetically modified organisms similar to that evolving in Australia and New Zealand.

### **Ministers Announce Expert Scientific Panel**

In late December 1999 the Canadian Ministers of Health, Agriculture and Environment announced the GOC's intention to convene an independent "blue-ribbon" expert scientific panel to examine anticipated scientific developments in food biotechnology and provide the GOC with advice on the food regulatory system and the scientific capacity required to ensure the safety of new food products being developed through biotechnology. This panel is distinct and separate from the Canadian Biotechnology Advisory Council (CBAC).

The new panel, which will be established by the Royal Society of Canada and will be independent of GOC influence, will have the following terms of reference:

- (A) to forecast the types of foods from biotechnology that could be submitted for regulatory safety reviews over the next ten years.
- (B) to forecast the science likely to be used to develop these products and describe the potential risks, short or long-term, to human health, animal health, and the environment, associated with these foods.
- (C) the panel will assess approaches and methodologies being developed in Canada and internationally to evaluate the safety of these new foods.
- (D) will identify the scientific capacity required by the GOC to address any health concerns related to these foods.

- (E) identify any new policies, guidelines and regulations related to science that may be required, including the need for long-term studies to assure human health.

The list of members of the expert panel will be announced in mid-January, an interim report is expected by June 2000 and a final report is due to the GOC by late summer 2000. The panel will be composed of highly qualified and well-regarded expert authorities, but knowledgeable observers note that given the increasing polarization of the debate it will be "a very difficult task" to select members whose objectivity will be unassailable.

### **Panel Is a Response to Recent Developments**

According to a central figure in this initiative, the panel is the GOC's response to the rapidity of developments in Canada with respect to GM-foods over the past several months. In addition to the anti-GM campaign led by Greenpeace, Canadian-based food processors McCain foods and Maple Leaf Foods and a major potato growers' association have announced that they have decided to forego GM potatoes. Also, the president of the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB), the state-trading enterprise that markets western Canadian wheat for export and domestic consumption, has enunciated a policy that calls for a moratorium on the introduction of transgenic wheat and barley varieties in Canada until the CWB system is able to accurately segregate GMO and non-GMO grains.

The principals in these cases claim that their actions are a response to consumer demands for GM-free products. Because Canada has a disproportionately large number of companies involved in agri-food biotechnology (26 percent of all biotech firms), larger than either the U.S. (8 percent of firms) or Europe (11 percent of firms), GOC officials are concerned that if the anti-GM trend continues it could significantly disrupt the development of Ag-biotech as a driver of the innovation economy.

This new panel, in concert with recommendations expected from the Canadian Biotechnology Advisory Committee (CBAC) on broad policy issues and from the Canadian General Standards Board on voluntary labeling of foods derived from biotechnology is intended to illustrate to Canadians that the GOC can and will ensure the safety of GM food and underscores the GOC's resolve to address consumer concerns in a transparent, science-based manner. A by-product of this effort, it is hoped, will be to reestablish a climate of confidence for the nascent biotechnology industry.

### **Comment**

Significantly, unlike the CBAC, which reports privately to a committee of GOC ministers, the report of the expert panel will be presented simultaneously to the public and to the GOC. Thus, the panel's recommendations will not be subject to vetting by the GOC - and could therefore contain recommendations that do not conform with current or anticipated GOC policy.

One issue the panel is likely to address is comparative advantage and disadvantage of a product-oriented regulatory approach toward biotechnology (currently in place in the U.S. and Canada), versus a process-oriented regulatory approach (similar to that being created Australia).

A recommendation to examine such a process-orientated approach, including the suggestion to investigate the advisability and utility of a "gene law" and a "transgenics regulatory agency" (similar to Australia's proposed "Gene Technology Bill" and "Office of the Gene Technology Regulator") was in fact made to the GOC by the House of Commons Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development in a 1996 report.

The recommendations arising from this panel have the potential to generate significant ramifications for the U.S. - Canada relationship in the biotechnology arena and could, as a consequence have an impact on trade.

**Contact**

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