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Australia

Food and Agricultural Import Regulations and Standards

Australia and Genetically Modified Organisms 1999

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Report Highlights:

Australia is currently struggling with the regulation and promotion of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs). The Government sees the acceptance of biotechnology as essential if Australia is to retain its competitiveness as an agricultural exporting nation. There is consensus in the farming community that Australia must aggressively embrace this technology or be left behind in the race for export markets. A number of Australian food companies have moved ahead of the GMO debate by removing food ingredients derived from GMO's from their products.

Australia, like many other countries, is currently struggling with the regulation and promotion of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs). The Government of Australia (GOA) sees the acceptance of biotechnology as essential if Australia is to retain its competitiveness as an agricultural exporting nation. Farm groups are quite supportive of this technology and are worried that they could be denied access to new developments in this area. Consumers in general seem to be accepting foods with GMO ingredients, but a recently concluded consensus forum on gene technology in the food chain indicates that there is some concern about the new technology and the lack of participation in the decision making process. A small nascent consumer/environmental group is attempting to slow or halt the spread of GMOs, but has had limited success in this effort. However, some companies have begun positioning themselves as an alternative to GMO foods. While they have been producing "GMO free" products, they are not labeling these products as such. New regulations requiring the labeling of all GMO foods are being developed and should be available for comment in mid 1999.

In introducing the 1999 budget, the GOA clearly demonstrated that biotechnology is an important part of Australia's industrial strategy. In that budget A\$17.5 million was allocated for the establishment of two new government agencies to handle the regulation and promotion of biotechnology. The Office of the Gene Technology Regulator (OGTR) will be established in the Department of Health at a cost of A\$7.5 million, while Biotechnology Australia will be located in the Department of Industry at a cost of A\$10 million. While all of the details are yet to be nailed down, the following is the current status of these new agencies.

The OGTR will replace the current quasi-voluntary system of regulation and will have the following functions: regulate all aspects of the development, production and use of genetically modified organisms and their products, where no other existing regulatory body has responsibility; work with regulatory bodies to ensure the consistent application of standards and harmonize assessments across all systems of regulations; and undertake or commission research in the area of risk assessment. One key part of the OGTR is the proposed Gene Technology Advisory Committee (GTAC) which will in effect be a continuation of the present Genetic Manipulation Advisory Committee (GMAC) which has most of the responsibility for current regulation.

Biotechnology Australia's tasks are to: develop a national strategy for biotechnology; develop a public awareness program to provide information about biotechnology and gene technology; support training for developers and managers of intellectual property; and to secure better access to genetic resources and gene collections. The strategy is expected to be completed this year after extensive consultation with industry and the public which will give all stakeholders an opportunity to contribute.

The Australia New Zealand Food Authority (ANZFA) is a partnership between ten governments: the Federal, State and Territory governments of Australia and the New Zealand Government. ANZFA is responsible for developing, varying and reviewing standards for food available in Australia and New Zealand. ANZFA also has the responsibility for assessing the consumer safety of GMO foods. In August 1998 the Australian New Zealand Food Standards Council (ANZFSC), composed of Health Ministers, voted to ban foods containing GMO's from mid-May 1999 unless the GMO's had passed ANZFA safety assessments. This ruling was subsequently amended to allow products that had been passed by overseas authorities to be sold while they undergo safety assessments if they were registered with ANZFA by April 30, 1999. Twenty GMO food crops were registered including: glyphosphate tolerant soybeans, canola, corn, sugar beet, and cotton; glufosinate tolerant corn and canola; Bt insect resistant corn, potatoes and cotton; virus resistant potatoes; bromoxynil tolerant cotton and canola; high oleic soybeans; and various mixtures of the above. Currently ANZFA has completed safety assessments, and approved, two crops - Roundup Ready soybeans and Ingard cottonseed oil.

Labeling laws introduced by ANZFA in May 1999 require that foods produced using gene technology must be labeled where they are substantially different in any characteristic or property of the food when compared to their conventional counterpart. While there are no current labeling requirements on “substantially equivalent” foods, ANZFSC voted to require such labeling and has instructed ANZFA to develop labeling requirements for all foods containing GMOs. ANZFA has also been asked to define what a genetically modified food actually is. These standards are currently being developed and should be submitted to ANZFSC for approval later this year.

Farm groups have generally supported the acceptance of biotechnology. The National Farmers Federation has frequently stated that Australia’s success in agriculture in the next century will depend largely on its ability to capitalize on biotechnology. One of the commonly expressed fears of farmers is that they will be locked out of this technology. Others fear that not enough resources will be put into developing biotech products for Australia because of the relatively limited size of the market. Another frequently expressed anxiety is that the multinationals are locking up possibilities for further research and have even refused to license developed products for production in Australia. While these are all common concerns, there is general consensus that Australia must aggressively embrace this technology or be left behind in the race for export markets.

In reaction to negative stories and reports on biotechnology, a new alliance was formed to present a united front of farmers, researchers and agribusiness in promoting biotechnology. The alliance includes, the National Farmer’s Federation, Avcare, which represents crop and veterinary chemical companies, the Grains Research and Development Corporation, the Seed Industry Association, the Australian Biotechnology Association, Co-operative Research Centers Association and the fertilizer company Pivot Ltd. The objective of this alliance is to improve the understanding of the benefits of biotechnology.

In an attempt to engage the “average” Australian in the gene technology debate, a recent Australian Consensus Conference on "Gene Technology in the Food Chain" was held, modeled on similar forums in Canada. Fourteen “representative” citizens were asked to discuss and provide recommendations on the future use of biotechnology in Australia. The group was given presentations from experts both for and against biotechnology. The consensus of the group was the rejection of the release of any new GMO Foods without extensive labeling and testing. The group stated their desire for additional information, consultation and regulation. If the conclusions and recommendations from this conference are indeed indicative of overall consumer acceptance of GMO foods in Australia, much work remains before the public is comfortable with this new technology.

A number of Australian food companies have moved ahead of the GMO debate by removing food ingredients derived from GMO's from their products. While the companies pointed out that they have received very few complaints or inquiries from consumers, they have made a strategic decision to use GMO free ingredients in their products. These companies have openly stated that their actions were not prompted by concern about the safety of the technology. Although there are no regulations preventing these companies from advertizing their products as “GMO Free”, they have not yet decided to label them as such. One company, whose advertising campaign touts the healthy image of its products, indicated that a small but significant proportion of consumers were concerned about GMO foods and they just sought to neutralize the issue by going to GMO free products.

Australia is closely following developments in the rest of the world as authorities are well aware that if international consumers do not accept GMO products, they will have no choice but to produce the products that consumers will buy. Some point to the success that Australia has had in selling canola oil from non-genetically modified canola to Europe as a reason to go slow in accepting this technology.

The coming year will be critical in setting the future course of biotechnology in Australia as some form of labeling is initiated, safety assessments concluded, a GOA strategy paper is prepared, and the new agencies begin operation. Considerable public debate will accompany these activities.

Web sites for additional information.

Australian New Zealand Food Authority

www.anzfa.gov.au

The Genetic Manipulation Advisory Committee

www.dist.gov.au/science/gmac

Biotechnology Australia

www.isr.gov.au/ba