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New Zealand

Biotechnology

General Election and GM Crop Find

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Report Highlights: In the wake of New Zealand's July 27 general election, the Labour Party has formed a formal coalition with the Progressive Coalition Party and gained support on confidence and money supply from the United Future Party. The United Future Party has indicated that it is in favor of letting the moratorium on the release of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) expire. Consequently, it now becomes more likely that the moratorium will be lifted in October 2003. Separately, MAF has just implemented a new, stricter GM testing regime for seed imports, which comes at a time when a crop of animal feed hybrid corn grown for seed was found to contain illegal genetically modified (GM) seeds.

Includes PSD changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Unscheduled Report
Wellington [NZ1], NZ

After the count of special votes the 120 seats in New Zealand's parliament are now distributed as follows: Labour 52, National 27, NZ First 13, Act 9, Greens 9, United Future 8, Progressive Coalition 2. Labour has established a formal minority coalition government with the Progressive Coalition, and United Future has formally agreed to support Labour on all votes of confidence and money supply for the Government's full term in office. If United Future gives its support to the Labour-Progressive coalition to let the GM moratorium expire, the Government would be ensured to retain 62 seats out of the 120 seats in parliament on matters of confidence and money supply. Therefore, the likelihood that the moratorium will expire in October 2003 remains, unless public pressure forces the Government to change its mind.

Separately, the public's confidence in New Zealand's ability to discover GM seeds in imported and declared 'GM-free' seeds has been further tested after the latest finding of GM seeds in maize crops harvested in April/May 2002 by Pacific Seeds on 22 hectares in Pukekohe and Gisborne. Pacific Seeds had contracted growers and imported seed from the U.S. to raise hybrid corn, grown for seed. Four parent seed lines and two hybrid crosses were grown in Pukekohe and Gisborne. Surprisingly, the two hybrid crosses grown in the two locations were found to contain GM seeds. Approximately 35 MT of seed are suspected to contain GM seeds and are due to be destroyed on the initiative of Pacific Seeds (note: under the current GM moratorium it is illegal to release GMOs into the environment).

Further tests by MAF-accredited laboratories in Australia and the U.S. are currently being conducted to establish whether the initial tests may have produced 'false positives'. The parent lines were tested before they were imported into New Zealand but no GM material was found at the time. Re-testing of the original four parent lines and the progeny of those parent lines is also being undertaken. According to MAF Biosecurity, if these tests show up negative, it would raise the possibility that the GM-contamination was due to cross-pollination from other maize crops grown in New Zealand implying that GM maize may already be present in New Zealand (or a more remote possibility is that the maize crops were deliberately introduced). In the case of GM corn already being present in New Zealand it would mean that New Zealand may have been wittingly or unwittingly importing GM seeds for years before routine testing started in recent years. In a New Zealand media report it is claimed that the New Zealand seed company Corson admitted having grown GM maize in Gisborne as far back as the early 1990s for Ciba-Geigy. However, the company reportedly also told the media that only small amounts were grown in a controlled nursery environment, indicating that their seeds could not be the origin of the latest GM seed finding.

Federated Farmers of New Zealand commented that the possibility of cross-pollination from the crops in Gisborne and Pukekohe with other crops would have been highly unlikely, as the seed production protocols for growing hybrid seed crops should ensure that crops are sufficiently isolated to ensure purity of the seed line. There are no official reports made available to the public that would indicate the extent of the buffer zones around the crops at the time, but MAF will examine the land where the crops were grown as well as the bordering land to ensure no viable seeds have remained in the soil. In this case, the buffer zones would have served the double purpose preventing cross-pollination contamination to and from other maize crops. MAF Biosecurity made the point that it would not instigate investigations at this point but wait until definite laboratory results become available shortly.

According to MAF, the likelihood that a population of GM corn becomes established in New Zealand without human intervention is highly unlikely. New Zealand has no native plants or weeds of the *Zea* family with which any GM corn could be crossed. Furthermore, cultural practices in crop rotations are usually such that corn is not planted into the same paddocks for two subsequent years. This means that even if viable GM seeds were to remain in the soil, they would not be able to reach maturity and grow new cobs.

At the time of the GM seed findings MAF had also implemented a new regime to test imported maize seed for GM content. The new regime dictates that every shipment instead of every third shipment would be tested for GM seeds (mandatory testing will also be introduced for canola seed in October and soy seed in November). This, in fact, is an acknowledgment that virtually no country can be certified to be GM free. The ministry will, however, consider waiving the test for shipments from countries, such as Australia, with no commercial production of that particular GM crop if it was satisfied the country had good testing systems in place and tight border controls. Special applications from other countries would also be considered, which could mean that routine testing of shipments might be replaced by random sampling. Whether such dispensations from a mandatory testing regime will ever be granted remains to be seen.