



The Hon. Barnaby Joyce MP

Minister for Agriculture
Federal Member for New England



Ref: MNMC2014-02428

Dr Dennis Jensen MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Petitions
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Dr Jensen

As Minister for Agriculture, I welcome the opportunity to respond to the petition submitted to the Standing Committee on Petitions regarding the use of pesticides and genetically modified (GM) crops and their impact on public health and the environment.

As reflected in our robust regulatory systems, the Australian government is committed to the highest standards of safety for our nation's food and public spaces and a Royal Commission on the use of pesticides in open spaces is not warranted. The Australian regulatory system already recognises the need for appropriate controls for the use of agricultural biotechnology, such as pesticides and GM organisms. Where used safely, agricultural biotechnology significantly enhances the productivity of our agricultural sector and protects our community from unwanted organisms.

The Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) is the independent national regulator responsible for assessing the safety of agricultural chemicals, including pesticides. It conducts rigorous scientific assessments of the potential risks that chemicals pose to human health, occupational health and safety, the environment and trade. The APVMA also reviews registered agricultural chemicals when concerns are raised about their safety and effectiveness.

The APVMA regulates agricultural chemicals up to point of sale. State and territory governments are responsible for regulation after the point of sale, including control of uses in public spaces. State and territory legislation specifically requires that agricultural chemicals are used legally and that users are appropriately trained and licensed.

In regulating agricultural chemicals, the APVMA seeks expert scientific input from the Department of Environment, the Department of Health and Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ). The Department of the Environment provides environmental risk assessments, while FSANZ provides dietary exposure assessments of chemical residues in food to ensure public health standards are not exceeded. The APVMA and FSANZ establish Maximum Residues Limits (MRL), the highest concentration of an agricultural chemical residue allowable in a food following use of that chemical.

In relation to the petition's concerns about herbicide tolerant GM crops, I am pleased to report that Australia has one of the world's strongest regulatory regimes for the approval of GM products. The Office of the Gene Technology Regulator (the OGTR) regulates all dealings with GM organisms. The OGTR performs a thorough assessment of each GM organism before it can reach the market and will only issue licences if risks can be managed so as to protect the health and safety of people and the environment. Further information is available at www.ogtr.gov.au.

Agricultural biotechnology has brought huge benefits to Australian farmers and to the environment. For example, Australian cotton farmers have been growing GM cotton varieties since 1996. In 2013, almost the entire national crop was devoted to GM varieties, which has contributed to a 90 per cent reduction in insecticide use across the industry.

The Australian government is committed to providing appropriate information to enable consumers to make informed decisions about what they eat and feed their families. Australia's requirements for GM food labelling are mandatory and are recognised as some of the most practical in the world. GM foods and ingredients (including food additives and processing aids from GM sources) must be identified on labels with the words 'genetically modified' if novel DNA and/or novel protein is present in the final food product. GM foods must also be labelled if their significant composition or nutritional values have been altered, which are factors known to cause allergic responses in particular sections of the population. Labelling according to the final product rather than the GM process itself ensures that labelling laws are enforceable. All food manufacturers must comply with these labelling laws.

An independent panel conducted a review of food labelling law and policy and released the final report, *Labelling Logic*, in January 2011. *Labelling Logic* contains several recommendations regarding labelling of new technologies, including GM food. On 9 December 2011, the Legislative and Governance Forum on Food Regulation (the Forum), considered its response to the recommendations in *Labelling Logic*. The Forum has proposed actions for implementation over the next five years that endeavour to balance improving the general information on food labels to meet consumers' needs, against maintaining marketing flexibility and minimising the regulatory burden and costs on industry and barriers to international trade.

To ensure regulatory measures continue to provide adequate protection of human health, the Australian Total Dietary Study (ATDS) is conducted approximately every two years. The ATDS estimates the dietary exposure of the Australian population to a range of agricultural chemical residues through the testing of food samples that are prepared to a 'table ready' state. The 23rd ATDS was published in 2011 and found that the levels of agricultural chemicals in foods do not pose a risk to public health, consistent with previous findings. The 25th ATDS is in progress and will further monitor levels of agricultural chemicals in foods and beverages.

As the Minister for Agriculture, I do not support a Royal Commission on the use of pesticides. Australia has a world class regulatory system for Agricultural chemicals and GM products. Safe effective chemicals and GM products are vital for agricultural sustainability as well as farm profitability and I welcome innovations that help Australia's farmers become more productive in our challenging conditions. Such innovations are vital to maintaining the global competitiveness of our agricultural industry and meeting global food and fibre demands.

Yours sincerely

Barnaby Joyce MP

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