Senate Community Affairs Committee

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH AND AGEING PORTFOLIO

Supplementary Budget Estimates 2010-2011, 20 October 2010

Question: E10-018

OUTCOME 1: Population Health

Topic: POST-MARKET MONITORING OF GM FOODS

Written Question on Notice

Senator Siewert asked:

What is being done to explore the post-market introduction effects of the population-wide consumption of ingredients derived from genetically modified processes?

Answer:

The Government maintains an inherently cautious approach to the use of gene technology in food production and supports the regulatory framework which was established more than ten years ago. All activities with live and viable GM organisms are regulated by the Gene Technology Regulator. The Regulator would not authorise the release of a GM crop into the environment unless an assessment shows that the potential risks to human health and safety and the environment can be effectively managed. This includes compliance monitoring of commercial-scale agricultural production in Australia of GM food crops such as cotton and canola.

GM foods are not permitted in the food supply unless they have been individually approved having satisfactorily met the requirements of a comprehensive safety assessment. FSANZ is responsible for assessing all GM foods on a case-by-case basis, whether derived from crops grown domestically or in overseas countries, using the best available scientific evidence. This approach accords with internationally-established scientific principles and guidelines, used by food regulatory agencies around the world including in Canada, Japan and the European Union. No GM food would be permitted in the food supply if there was any credible evidence that it could pose a safety concern.

Currently, there are no population-based health surveillance programs linked to GM foods in any country. Based on the outcomes of several international meetings, a key limitation is the absence of a system capable of monitoring the consumption patterns of GM foods in the population, and health effects in both exposed and non-exposed individuals/populations, so that a risk estimate can be derived. In addition, as all pre-market evaluations conducted by agencies such as the European Food Safety Authority, Health Canada and FSANZ confirm the risk of GM food as being no different from conventional food, there is no identifiable hazard or effect on human health that could easily be monitored. Taken together with variation in diets and dietary components, genetic variability within a population that affects individual predisposition to possible adverse food-related effects, and other environmental factors unrelated to diet, it is unlikely that observational epidemiological studies running for at least 10-15 years would uncover any health effects directly attributable to the GM nature of a food.