

Gene Ethics and Friends of the Earth

MEDIA RELEASE Thursday April 11, 2019

Genetically modified super-muscled pork may hit supermarket shelves soon

Changes to Australia's Gene Technology Regulations [announced yesterday](#) will allow a whole category of new genetically manipulated (GM) animals, plants and microbes to enter our environment and food chain with no safety assessments and probably no labelling. These radical new GM organisms already include [super-muscled pigs](#), [non-browning mushrooms](#), and [wheat with powdery mildew-resistance](#).

"The Office of the Gene Technology Regulator (OGTR) should act as our community's referee on GM organisms but is sidelined before the new GM game begins. CRISPR and other new GM methods were invented less than five years ago so have scant history of safe use," says Gene Ethics Director, Bob Phelps.

"A [growing body of evidence](#) shows new CRISPR and other GM techniques are not as precise and safe as industry scientists claim. It is vital that GM animals, plants and microbes produced in this way are assessed for safety before being released into our environment and our food supply."

Louise Sales, Coordinator of Friends of the Earth's Emerging Tech Project said "Australia is the first country in the world to deregulate the use of CRISPR and other gene editing techniques in animals - raising serious environmental, animal welfare and food safety concerns. Deregulation also poses major risks to our food export markets that need to be fully assessed."

"We are deeply concerned that the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator (OGTR) has failed to revisit its claim that these GM techniques result in no greater risk than natural mutations – when the science is showing us just the opposite."

"In July 2018, the European Union's top court [ruled](#) that gene editing techniques such as CRISPR pose similar risks to older GM techniques and need to be assessed for safety in the same way. Our key agricultural competitor [New Zealand](#) will also regulate these techniques as GM, potentially disrupting Trans-Tasman trade."

Yet the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources [refused](#) to release the advice it gave to Legislative and Governance Forum on Gene Technology ministers, on the likely trade impacts of deregulating the new techniques. When asked in Senate Estimates about the potential market risks of deregulation, Daryl Quinlivan, Secretary of the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources, said it is an issue "producers and exporters will have to work out" and that they were not asked to do a "comprehensive analysis".¹

Several Institutional Biosafety Committees [opposed](#) the proposed deregulation of the GM techniques on safety grounds, including the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research Institutional Biosafety Committee (IBC), Victoria University IBC, Children's Medical Research Institute and Children's Hospital Westmead IBC, and the University of Wollongong IBC.

"When recommending deregulation, the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator ignored the advice of many biosafety experts, instead adopting the views of scientists working in institutions with [clear commercial conflicts of interest](#), and commercial partnerships with Monsanto."

"The new GM techniques are quite clearly genetic engineering – the fact that the OGTR is even considering not regulating them shows how the biotech industry has captured it," concluded Ms Sales.

More comment: Louise Sales 0435 589 579; Bob Phelps 0449 769 066

¹ Commonwealth of Australia (2019) Proof Committee Hansard Senate Estimates Hearing: Rural & Regional Affairs & Transport Legislative Committee: Estimates, Tuesday, February 19 2019, p. 15, https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/estimate/e178d2ee-0936-4e22-b734-5719139e516a/toc_pdf/Rural%20and%20Regional%20Affairs%20and%20Transport%20Legislation%20Committee_2019_02_19_6944.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22committees/estimate/e178d2ee-0936-4e22-b734-5719139e516a/0000%22