

## Consumer choice in food and agricultural products

Australia is a democratic country. As citizens, we elect our governments, and we assume this is our right as a member of a democratic society.

But, should our citizenship end there? Do we also have a responsibility to be involved in other decision making? Specifically, do citizens have a role to play in decision-making processes surrounding agriculture and GM foods in particular?

In this lesson, you will examine how consumers (as citizens) can be involved in consultation and society's involvement more broadly, in the production and sale of GM foods. You will also look at the different levels at which consumers can be involved, the processes and power that each can entail.

### You will need:

- the background reading sheet for this lesson
- access to the internet or print outs of the suggested websites
- a notebook.

### What to do:

#### Step 1. Reading

Read through the case studies for this lesson below.

#### Poultry giants quail at GM feed

February 2005

Consumer backlash against genetically modified food has led to the three largest poultry companies, who produce 80 per cent of chicken sold in Australia, to stop using GM feed.

Inghams, Bartter-Steggles and Baiada announced that they will be phasing out the use of imported GM soy in chicken feed. Greenpeace described their decision as "a major win for consumer power", following a campaign of phone calls, faxes and letters to the poultry companies.

Greenpeace campaigner, John Hepburn, said that the poultry companies had been importing 300,000 tonnes of soy, which was "the biggest single source of GE contamination of the Australian food chain".

"The poultry industry is to be congratulated for responding to public concerns," he said.

Under the current Australian Food Code, poultry fed with GM soy does not have to be labelled as containing GM ingredients. However, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission has ruled that it is misleading for companies to label the same poultry as "GE free" or "not genetically modified".

Mr Hepburn said the commission decision had “put quite a lot of extra pressure” on the chicken companies, but also said that the catalyst for the move to non-GM feed was the consumer backlash.

#### **UK supermarkets to stay GM-free**

27 January <http://www.foodnavigator.com>

Consumer indifference – not to say hostility – towards GM products in the UK means that British supermarkets are likely to stay firmly GM-free in 2004, according to an annual survey of retailers carried out by [www.gmfoodnews.com](http://www.gmfoodnews.com).

The survey results show that opposition to GM foods is as strong as it was in 1999, when supermarkets first removed GM foods and ingredients from their shelves. Just as in 1999, no UK supermarket includes GM food or ingredients in its own-label products and supermarkets are also increasingly specifying GM-free feed for animals producing their meat, milk and eggs.

The UK government is apparently looking to take a more open approach to GM crops this year - but there will be few, if any - opportunities for any British-grown GM crops on supermarket shelves, according to the survey.

Ever-conscious of consumer antipathy towards GM foods, all the British supermarket chains contacted by [www.gmfoodnews.com](http://www.gmfoodnews.com) confirmed that they would not be stocking any product containing GM ingredients.

“The Co-op will not be introducing any GM products in the coming year,” said Alan Davies from the co-operative’s customer relations department, a sentiment echoed by his counterpart at Iceland, Pauline Chapman. “As we were the first retailer to ban GM foods in May 1998, I can confirm that we will continue with the decision that we made then.”

Kate O’Sullivan at Sainsbury’s said much the same thing: “In response to overwhelming customer concern and demand for non-GM foods, Sainsbury’s was the first major supermarket to eliminate GM ingredients from all own-brand products. All of our own brand food, pet food and dietary supplements are clearly labelled and do not contain any GM ingredients. We continue to offer our customers the quality food and choice they expect from Sainsbury’s.”

Lucy Taylor of Waitrose went even further: “Since the end of March 1999, no Waitrose own label product has contained any GM ingredients as defined by law. Food safety is of paramount importance to both Waitrose and its customers.

“The debate about growing GM crops and the foods produced from them has elevated concerns about food, environmental and consumer safety issues. These include the possible effects on wildlife and their environment, and the transfer of ‘inserted’ characteristics to other crops or native plants.

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#### **Biotechnology Online School Resource**

For further information contact the Gene Technology Information Service on freecall Australia-wide **1800 631 276**.

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### GM food labelling in Australia

In the 1990s, the growth of GM crops grew rapidly. GM foods began entering the food chain.

Industry and science groups stated that GM foods were safe for consumption. But, consumer groups and anti-gene technology groups stated that they could potentially be unsafe.

Increased media coverage about GM foods – and their general rejection in the United Kingdom – led to a strong debate in Australia about the need to label GM foods. The food industry stated that the cost of labelling would add to the cost of food produced, yet public surveys showed that about 90 per cent of the public wanted GM foods labelled.

In March 1999, a community consensus conference on gene technology in the food chain also recommended labelling of GM foods.

Australian governments considered the arguments by consumer groups and industry. In late 2000, they announced that mandatory labelling of GM foods would come into effect in December 2001.

Any food or food ingredient must be labelled with the words 'genetically modified' if genetic material or protein from the genetic modification is present in the final food. However, there are some exceptions, such as where refining of the foods removes the GM component, or where a GM ingredient of the food is present at less than 0.1%.

In announcing mandatory labelling of GM foods, the Government stated that this was not a matter of food safety – as GM foods were subjected to thorough food safety testing – but a matter of consumer choice.

### Step 2. Warm up discussion

This should be done as a class, so only allow about five minutes or so per question.

Consider the following questions:

- Do you think individual citizens have the power to influence the following groups' decisions about developments in GM food and agriculture, and if so, how?
  - growers
  - manufacturers
  - supermarkets
  - government

- Can you think of other individuals or organisations (local, national, or international) that may have power to influence whether or not GM foods or agricultural products are available in Australia? Do industry and activist groups have a place in the discussion?
- Do you think individuals *should* be able to influence decisions relating to whether or not GM foods and agricultural products are available in Australia?
- If citizens are able to influence decisions, how much power should an individual have?
- Are there processes in place that allow community input into decision-making in Government about GM foods?

### Step 3. Group work

Work in groups of 3-4 to assess one of the case studies below. The case studies present a particular example of how community input has changed an outcome relating to GM foods. Each was achieved using a different approach, but all relate to community concerns about GM foods and agricultural products.

Your evaluation should involve the following:

- An indication of the **types of people** who were involved in changing the outcome. Were they individuals or groups? Do these groups represent the population?
- The potential for this kind of groups or individuals to **influence** government decisions relating to GM foods and agriculture
- Recommendations for how **young people** could be more closely involved in government decision-making processes surrounding GM foods and agriculture
- What are some of the limitations of such consultations? Are there other ways you can suggest?
- Why do people have different opinions? What influences these opinions? Are they all right, or are some more right than others?

**Step 4. Closing discussion**

Each group will present their evaluation to the class. Encourage your audience to ask questions and make comments.

**For further investigation**

A range of options for case studies are provided below:

- The New Zealand Royal Commission on Genetic Modification;  
<http://www.rsnz.org/topics/biol/gene/>
- The First Australian Consensus Conference on Gene Technology in the Food Chain; <http://www.austmus.gov.au/consensus/>
- The Interim Office of the Gene Technology Regulator Public used forums to encourage community comment on gene technology regulation:  
<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-mediarel-yr2000-dept-mr20002.htm>
- The Office of the Gene Technology Regulator undertakes regular consultations over applications for licenses:  
[http://www.ogtr.gov.au/internet/ogtr/publishing.nsf/Content/pubfactsheets-3/\\$FILE/factpublic.pdf](http://www.ogtr.gov.au/internet/ogtr/publishing.nsf/Content/pubfactsheets-3/$FILE/factpublic.pdf)
- NHMRC community consultation meetings on guidelines for animal-to-human transplant research: <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/media/media/rel04/xenotr.htm>

Read about these consultation processes and think about how they differ and how they are similar.

- Do you think these were successful consultations?
- Were these debate, consultation or dialogue processes? What are the differences between them?
- Are these consultation processes about just listening to people, taking their opinions on board, or trying to change other people's minds?