



West Australian
Tuesday 21/04/2009

Page: 12
Section: General News
Region: Perth, AU
Circulation: 192964
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 273.55 sq.cms.



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press clip

Rain will see start of GM canola trials on 17 farms

JODIE THOMSON

WA grain farmer Norm Jenzen knows his neighbours will be looking over the fence with added interest this winter.

As one of 17 farmers involved in the State's first commercial-sized trials of genetically modified canola, he is prepared for his trial site to be under close scrutiny from neighbours, the farming fraternity and even the broader community.

He plans to sow Roundup Ready canola, which was delivered late last week to his Cunderdin property, as soon as the rains arrive.

Large-scale trials, including 17 farmer sites and three Department of Agriculture plots, are expected to be planted in coming weeks, covering a total of 850ha.

The trials have been the subject of intense debate since the State Government announced late last year it would exempt the commercial trials from a State-wide ban on GM crop production.

Opponents warn the trials will lead to contamination of conventional crops, potentially threatening export markets which remain wary

of the product. But proponents argue GM canola has been grown for years in the exporting countries of Canada and the US, while more recently NSW and Victoria have moved into commercial production.

"I hear the debate all the time," Mr Jenzen said. "It's going to be a hot topic for the next 12 months. I say, let's try it, let's debate it and see what happens at the end of the day."

The canola has a modified gene which makes it resistant to the herbicide Roundup, with the technology developed by multi-national company Monsanto.

Mr Jenzen hopes it will allow him to better control weeds and reduce his chemical use, ultimately improving his bottom line.

"I'm looking at it from an economic viewpoint, it has got to stack up and whether it does, hopefully we will know by the end of the year," he said.

"We have seen it in America and in Canada but we have got to see how it works in our own backyard and in our own climate."

His neighbours have been informed of the 46ha trial.



Pioneer: Norm Jenzen is preparing to plant a commercial trial of GM canola.

Picture: Ian Ferguson