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Dawn of a new biotech boom

By GREGOR HEARD

MONSANTO'S director of scientific affairs Harvey Glick has shrugged off suggestions genetic modification (GM) advances had stalled and predicted a boom period for biotech products as the "second generation" of traits became available to growers.

"I think we are just at the beginning of an exciting period, with crops being rolled out with new traits, especially in soybeans and corn," Dr Glick said.

The Canada-based scientist – in Australia for the recent Australian Biotech Conference – said the coming improvements were not just more of the same herbicide resistance traits either.

"We are working on more nitrogen-efficient and drought-tolerant lines, as well as oilseeds with higher oil levels."

He dismissed claims that many of the new traits being developed were being done by conventional breeding regardless of genetic modification.

"It's not fair to say it's just being done with conventional traits."

And work was still being done on perfecting existing traits.

"Take a look at Roundup Ready soybeans. Roundup Ready is one of the most widely planted traits, but we are not just taking old varieties and adding a new trait, we are developing a whole new technology, an improved version of glyphosate resistance.

"Yields have been between eight and 11 per cent higher."

However, the public's real interest was in totally new traits and Dr Glick said drought-tolerant GM varieties of corn and cotton would be available by 2012.

"Corn will be the first drought tolerant crop to hit the market,

hopefully in 2012, depending on regulatory approval."

He said he realised the news was not likely to wildly excite Aussie growers, who produce a negligible amount of corn, but said GM drought-resistant cotton would be a boon in Australian conditions.

Nitrogen-efficient GM lines would also fulfil a role in improving the environment, Dr Glick claimed.

"With reduced nitrogen application we will have less run-off of nitrogen into waterways, it will have a lot of environmental benefits, as well as agronomic."

A r m e d with a strong suite of products aimed at solving

these environmental problems, Dr Glick said he was confident public perception of GM products was changing.

"I am quite encouraged by what I see of late, we no longer have the luxury of ignoring GM as a

means to feed the world.

"Everybody knows the issues of food security and protecting the environment.

"Consumers understand the challenge of feeding the world – they want food that is more sustainable, that uses less water, energy and pesticide.

"That is what the combination of breeding and biotech is providing."

Dr Glick said that while anti-GM campaigners could have their own view on things, they had not come up with a clear solution.

"They are entitled to their own opinion, but they have not come up with any solutions to the food security issue."



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