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# Thanks for GM trials, now lift the ban

By COLIN BETTLES

ORGANISERS went to great lengths to maintain an agronomic focus on last week's Genetically Modified (GM) canola field days and steer clear of industry politics.

However, political lobbying is destined to play a critical role in the overall process and can't be ignored.

The effectiveness of the lobbying could prove just as telling in the final wash-up on the technology's future, as the GM crop's actual yield and performance.

The man at the centre of the decision-making is Agriculture and Food Minister Terry Redman.

He will attend another Roundup Ready canola field day tomorrow, at the Agriculture and Food Department's WA Northern Sandplain Research Station at Eradu.

Mr Redman will be accompanied by Geraldton MLA Ian Blayney, and will no doubt use the experience to help gauge further opinion.

The Minister is acutely aware that farmers are getting anxious about potentially growing the controversial crop on their farms next season, and will be hoping they can catch up with biotechnology users in other parts of the world, if the State Government lifts the current moratoria on its commercial production.

Monsanto says about 41,000 hectares of Roundup Ready canola was planted throughout Victoria and NSW in 2009, after those states lifted their bans on its commercial production in time for the 2008/09 season.

The global biotechnology company estimated GM canola is now being grown on about 600 paddocks on farms across the two States; representing an increase over last year's planted area of more than four-fold.

In WA, the GM Crops Free Areas Act 2003 is currently under review with the Government calling for public submissions by the August 14 closing date.

Mr Redman allowed an exemption to the Act this year, giving the green light to the large scale trials on 17 farms in WA, and three research stations, for a total of about 850ha.

Grains industry participants will now turn their attention to Mr Redman and the Liberal-National Government, urging them to lift the ban completely.

Based on the sentiment arising out of last week's industry event, and the attitude towards the performance of GM canola based on this season's trials, so far, growers' hopes will once again be raised.

However, critics of the technology will continue to argue vehemently against its use through a powerful public affairs campaign, and exert even more political pressure on Mr Redman, to keep WA GM-free.

Speaking at the field walk through the GM crop on his farm last week, Meckering graingrower John Snooke said he had a clear message to send Mr Redman about the technology's future.

"Firstly I would like to thank the partnership Government for allowing the trials to go ahead this season," he said.

"I think the industry at large is very thankful for that.

"We have been able to visually see the technology in use here in WA and we have learnt about the markets this year.

"The key message is that growers want choice.

"We have a massive market for the product and the Australian grains industry has the ability and the willingness to segregate GM canola.

"It will help us become sustainable on many different levels."

Speaking for the seed suppliers, Canola Breeders WA research director Wallace Cowling was cautious about making a political statement.

However, he said the science of GMs was clear.

He also stressed, the majority of growers "clearly want to start using the technology".

"GM is just another tool," he said.

"Growers want to be able to rotate chemicals and this is a tool for them to help manage the weeds on their farm.

"They are very excited and as far as the science goes, Roundup Ready canola is just another gene that helps farmers.



Meckering grower John Snooke (left), believes GM technology will improve farming sustainability on a number of levels.