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WANTFA tour achieves GM canola goal

By COLIN BETTLES

AFTER years of anticipation, the WA No-Tillage Farmers Association (WANTFA) fulfilled a long-time goal last week when it inspected a Genetically Modified (GM) canola crop growing in the paddock of a WA farmer.

The WANTFA executive committee visited the Corrigin farm of fellow member Wes Baker last week, as part of its annual bus tour, where members witnessed a GM canola crop flourishing.

WANTFA has advocated the use of GM canola in recent years, with its members often speaking out to criticise the State Government's moratorium on commercial GM canola production.

However, those days of lobbying ministers from the previous Labor Government are now a long and distant memory.

Mr Baker is one of the 17 growers participating in GM trials approved by Agriculture and Food Minister Terry Redman across 1000 hectares and 20 trials this year.

Despite the joy of seeing the GM canola growing next to dying weeds, the leading farm agronomy group wasted little time in advocating grower access to the next generation of cropping biotechnology.

WANTFA president Toll Temby said the WANTFA committee members were impressed by what they saw on Mr Baker's farm last week.

Mr Temby said he was particularly impressed by the protocols associated with the GM canola glyphosate application program.

He said the protocols helped to ensure glyphosate resistance was combated, and that any problems with it were not exacerbated.

"We need to see these other GM varieties developed in WA and Australia, because they will provide growers with an environmental advantage and a yield advantage," he said.

"We are looking for plants that will not only provide environmental and yield advantages, but also help to fix nitrogen in the soil effectively, at the same time, in the same way that lupins do.

"There is huge potential for this technology in WA, but we need to make sure it happens without unnecessary delays and that the technology is suitable to our conditions."

Mr Temby said he wanted to see GM wheats developed and introduced, sooner rather than later, and not suffer the same lengthy delays that have been associated with GM canola.

Mr Baker said the Roundup Ready GM canola growing on his farm was dry sown into wheat stubble in early May, and was starting to emerge in "good shape".

He said the crop received about 10mm of rain, a week and a half after being sown, and had

germinated well across most of the wet areas.

He is growing a 42ha GM canola trial, in a total canola program of 450ha.

The rest of his 2009-10 cropping program is made up of 880ha of wheat, 240ha of barley and 240ha of lupins.

"Like all of the canola that's growing here this year, it's had a slower than normal start because of the dry," he said.

"The GM canola was dry sown into wheat stubble and the weeds were quite thick.

"It germinated well and had its first application of glyphosate not long after and is looking excellent now.

"The weeds are dead and the canola is growing quite nicely."

Mr Baker said the crop would require another application of glyphosate between the four-leaf and six-leaf stage.

He said after the second application, "that's it, you can shut the gate, there's nothing else to do".

Mr Baker said about 10 WANTFA committee members visited his farm last week, and were impressed by what they saw.

He said they listened intently as he gave a presentation which explained the production process involved.

The WANTFA members were particularly interested in hearing about the rules for glyphosate application, and commented on how well the canola was growing, while the weeds were dying.

Mr Baker was in Perth this week, for a two-day media training course that has been offered to the 17 growers participating in the GM trials.

Mr Baker said he would not grow GM canola every year if it was introduced at the end of the commercial trials this season.

However, he said it would become a good tool for use in his weed management program.

"I would say almost other farmer in WA will be the same as me with regards to GM canola," he said.

"It will be a good tool to have in the shed but ultimately it will open the door for the development of other GM varieties and in particular for wheat.

"We need to see GM wheat varieties developed with drought tolerance, frost tolerance and salt tolerance.

"If we are allowed to grow GM canola crops, it will open the door for the development of these other varieties and most of the farmers I know, including WANTFA farmers, are keen to see that happen."

WANTFA executive officer David Minkey said WANTFA members were excited to learn about what was happening with Mr Baker's GM canola program during the final leg of last week's



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“As soon as we walked into the paddock on Wes’ farm, we could see why it is such a handy tool,” he said.

“The GM canola was flourishing and looked very healthy compared to all the weeds around it, which were yellow and dying.

“There was some yellow in the canola but that will grow out.”

