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Time for New Zealand to revisit the genetic modification debate

McGuinness Institute's latest report assesses 40 years of GM public policy in New Zealand and concludes there is more work to do

Today the McGuinness Institute is pleased to announce the publication of *An Overview of Genetic Modification in New Zealand 1973–2013: The first forty years*.

The Institute's chief executive, Wendy McGuinness, says, 'the report found that strategically, New Zealand is no further ahead on public policy regarding outdoor use of GMOs than it was when the Royal Commission on Genetic Modification reported its findings in 2001. Indeed, we consider New Zealand is less equipped to make a strategic decision to release GMOs in the outdoors in 2013 than it was a decade ago.

The report forms part of the Institute's flagship project, *Project 2058*. Forty years since the development of genetic modification (GM), the Institute believes it is timely to reassess New Zealand's approach to managing the benefits, costs and risks. The report provides a comprehensive overview of policy development through four key eras: (1) the journey towards the 2001 Royal Commission on Genetic Modification; (2) the Royal Commission and its findings, (3) the response to the Royal Commission, and (4) the era of institutional change from 2008 – 2013. See attached: *The First Forty years of GM: By the Numbers*.

McGuinness says, 'we found that many of the initiatives put in place after the Royal Commission, have since been disestablished or not progressed. Since 2001, New Zealand has significantly reduced its ability to collect strategic information that would enable informed decisions on GM to be taken. For example, New Zealand has disestablished the Bioethics Council (2009); discontinued Futurewatch, a work programme of MoRST (2011); discontinued the Bioscience Survey, formerly undertaken by Statistics NZ (2013), and has not reviewed or updated the Biotechnology Strategy, published in 2003 and due to expire this year.'

McGuinness notes that the Institute also found 'considerable evidence of a system that is showing symptoms of fatigue. Largely due to the significant institutional change that has occurred in the last five years, information is not well collected or reported, and institutional knowledge and therefore analytical capability and institutional linkages are likely to be significantly reduced.'

In addition, she says, recent moves by a number of local authorities to use the RMA to restrict outdoor GM research and releases demonstrates on-going concern in local communities about this issue, concerns that are yet to be addressed by central government.

'The 2001 Royal Commission on Genetic Modification proposed a strategic pathway, making 49 recommendations on the way forward. Twelve years later, with little evidence that outdoor research has generated any significant benefit for New Zealand, and continued consumer resistance to GM food globally, it seems timely to ask whether New Zealand is now better placed to make a decision to remain a GM-free food and fibre producer in the outdoors.'

The Institute's report makes 12 recommendations on how the current system could be strengthened, stressing the need for transparency, accountability, and consideration of the interests of all New Zealanders.

The report concludes by reflecting on the proposal that 'the most risk-adverse solution is to close down New Zealand's only two GM outdoor experiments on the basis that they create unnecessary public risk, with little or no public benefit, and to use those funds elsewhere. Currently the only two outdoor field tests are being operated by two Crown Research Institutes, AgResearch and Scion, and could therefore be closed down by government.

Our approach to GM crops in the outdoors is threefold: (1) Buy time, (2) Undertake a systemic review and (3) Think strategically. See attached: *The Three Stage Process*.

'The recent situation where Fonterra and New Zealand's reputation were damaged by a contamination scare of *Clostridium botulinum* in whey protein, highlights the vulnerability of our agricultural based economy and demonstrates the importance of timely and effective testing.' Fonterra chief executive Theo Spierings said 'Food safety and quality must always remain our top priority.' Fonterra commissioned independent testing from AgResearch, as it was only one of two research facilities in New Zealand capable of carrying out testing for the bacteria. As Spierings notes 'On the basis of the results we received from the AgResearch tests, we had no choice but to alert regulators, and announce a global precautionary recall with our customers'. Independent test results released yesterday, have definitively established that there was no presence of these bacteria in the whey protein.

McGuinness says one of the main aims of the report is to stimulate discussion and contribute to a meaningful conversation that will ensure future public policy is durable and fit for purpose. 'It is time for New Zealand to revisit the GM debate before the EPA receives an application to release a GMO into the outdoors. The time to build institutional capacity and think strategically is now.'

The report is available for download on the Institute's website (www.mcguinnessinstitute.org) and hard copies can be purchased from its online store.

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Attachments:
The First Forty years of GM: By the Numbers
The Three Stage Process

About the McGuinness Institute:

The McGuinness Institute is a non-partisan think tank working towards a sustainable future, contributing strategic foresight through evidence-based research and policy analysis. The Institute's overarching project, Project 2058, aims to explore New Zealand's long-term future and develop an appropriate national sustainable development strategy.

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