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MEDIA RELEASE

GM COTTON AS SAFE AS NON-GM COTTON IN NORTHERN AUSTRALIA

Following rigorous evaluation and extended public consultation, the Australian Gene Technology Regulator, Dr Sue Meek, announced today that she has issued a licence for the commercial release of five lines of genetically modified (GM) cotton in northern Australia.

Four of the approved varieties allow a herbicide to be sprayed at particular stages of growth without damaging the cotton plants. Three of the lines also resist specific cotton caterpillar pests during the early growth stage of the cotton.

All five varieties of cotton have been previously grown on a commercial scale in southern Australia, south of latitude 22° South (22°S). All varieties have also been trialled extensively in northern Australia (north of 22°S) under limited and controlled conditions. Another herbicide-resistant cotton was approved for use in northern Australia in August.

“Until recently, we did not know whether insect resistant GM cotton was more likely than non-GM cotton to become a weed in northern Australia,” Dr Meek said.

“Recent research has demonstrated that caterpillar pests are not the major factor controlling cotton growth in northern Australia. The spread of cotton is mainly limited by the availability of water and nutrients, and/or competition from other plants and insects such as grasshoppers. Therefore the genetic modifications will not make these GM cotton lines *weedy*,” Dr Meek said.

The recently approved lines are: Bollgard II[®] cotton; Roundup Ready[®] cotton; Roundup Ready Flex[®] cotton; Roundup Ready[®]/Bollgard II[®] cotton; and Roundup Ready Flex[®]/Bollgard II[®] cotton.

“The GM cotton lines approved for release have the same water, soil type, nutrient and climatic requirements as non-GM cotton. Therefore, any expansion of cotton production in northern Australia using these GM lines can only happen in regions suitable for growing any cotton,” Dr Meek said.

Monsanto has indicated that large scale commercial production of these cotton lines is not planned at this stage, and will not occur until a range of industry, community and infrastructure issues have been resolved. To begin with, the company only anticipates plant breeding, agronomic trials and seed production.

The assessment of this application was undertaken in close consultation with the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority who regulate use of herbicides and insecticides for agricultural crops. Food Standards Australia New Zealand has approved the use of oil and linters from these cotton lines in food.

More information on this decision (DIR66) is available on the Gene Technology Regulator’s website: <http://www.ogtr.gov.au/ir/dir066.htm>

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