

# Gene Technology Community Consultative Committee Meeting

## COMMUNIQUE

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This is the first communique of the Gene Technology Community Consultative Committee (GTCCC). It covers matters considered at the first and second meetings of the GTCCC held on 17-18 April 2002 and 15-16 July 2002 respectively.

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The GTCCC was established by the *Gene Technology Act 2000* (the Act) as a statutory advisory committee to the Gene Technology Regulator (the Regulator) and the Gene Technology Ministerial Council. All committee members hold office on a part-time basis.

At its first and second meetings the Committee considered the role of the GTCCC and the development of a work plan. The discussions covered a broad range of issues facing the new gene technology regulatory system. The outcomes of these discussions are summarised below.

### **Role and Future Work of the Committee**

Following discussions at both meetings, the Committee decided to frame and adopt an agreed purpose to guide their deliberations and future work as follows:

‘We collectively reflect a broad spectrum of community views and bring forward community concerns. In that capacity we advise on the processes of the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator (OGTR) and matters of general concern in relation to genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and also respond to requests for advice from the Regulator and the Gene Technology Ministerial Council.’

At the request of the Regulator, GTCCC discussed its key priorities and identified the following areas as the basis for its future work plan:

1. Review of documentation in regard to applications;
2. Review of the OGTR website design and other electronic communication;
3. Review of processes by which the OGTR can improve community consultation and participation including review of the effectiveness of information and communication provided to the community in general and to the regions involved in limited and controlled releases;
4. Write an overview of the public understanding of science literature; and
5. Consideration of issues relating to the interpretation of “the environment” under the Act.

Working groups have been formed for each of the five identified areas and draft reports will be considered at the third meeting of the GTCCC later in 2002.

## **GTCCC and Relationships with Other Committees**

The GTCCC, in considering its role in the new regulatory system for GMOs in Australia, recognised that it was one of three gene technology advisory committees. The GTCCC discussed written communiques from the two other committees, the Gene Technology Technical Advisory Committee (GTTAC) and the Gene Technology Ethics Committee (GTEC) set up under the new regulatory system, and heard verbal reports from the cross-members of these committees. The Committee agreed that this exchange of information from GTTAC and GTEC will be a feature of all GTCCC meetings.

## **Presentations**

At the April meeting, Mr Craig Cormick, Manager of the Public Awareness Program for Biotechnology Australia, provided the Committee with an overview of recent studies showing trends in public attitudes - including changes in areas of concern, ethical issues, and views of regulatory agencies over the past few years. The GTCCC will participate in the development of the next questionnaire that will contribute to this ongoing research.

Prior to the start of the July meeting, the Committee took part in an information session conducted by Dr TJ Higgins, Deputy Chief, Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation Plant Industry, on the science of gene technology, an overview of its current and possible future applications, and the potential benefits and risks associated with the technology.

## **Delivering Accountable Regulation and Encouraging Community Participation**

Consultation and community feedback is a consistent feature of the national regulatory system. Therefore, it was decided at the first meeting that GTCCC members and the OGTR would undertake a range of information gathering exercises to inform discussions at future meetings, with particular emphasis on the following areas:

1. The determination of the level of knowledge, communication channels and scope for participation for farmers and local government;
2. Possible ways farmers near GM crop releases could be targeted for information distribution and encouraged to participate; and
3. The quality, clarity, timeliness and accessibility of the information made available about proposed intentional releases of GMOs.

In seeking to encourage further consultation and community participation, the Committee focussed in their meetings on some specific areas of the new system. Examples of two areas of discussion are summarised below.

### *Communicating with the Community*

As the GTCCC is a community consultative committee, members believe that it is very important to work strongly towards fulfilling this role and it was decided that the Committee would write to a range of relevant stakeholders. The letter will introduce the Committee and invite organisations to express any views they may have about the extent of consultations that have been undertaken by the Regulator. The Committee anticipates that this will only be the beginning in developing strong communication channels with a wide range of key groups.

### *Notifiable Low Risk Dealings*

Notifiable Low Risk Dealings (NLRDs) are dealings with GMOs that have been assessed on the basis of long and extensive experience as posing low risks and are required to be conducted within certified contained facilities. Although NLRDs do not involve any intentional release into the environment, they must still be assessed and approved by an Institutional Biosafety Committee and must be notified to the Regulator.

The Committee proposed that public notification of NLRDs would benefit from a fuller description in more accessible language and accordingly requested that the OGTR explore ways to provide a plain English description of NLRDs on the public record for new and renewed dealings. The OGTR is currently reviewing the application form with a view to achieving improvements in the format and content.

### **Meetings in 2002**

GTCCC is scheduled to meet again later in 2002.

**For all inquiries, please contact the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator on  
1800 181 030 (free-call)**