

Communicating in an agricultural setting about the need for a GM crop that responds to local climate change and the need for food security – Scenario A

Case Study to Guidance for Communicating on Gene Technology 2025¹

In Queensland's fertile Darling Downs cropping region, temperatures are increasing. The all-important "finishing rains" are decreasing. Sally Gore² thinks that gene technology needs to be deployed quickly to develop new crop varieties or her farm will cease to be viable in these changing conditions. Gene technology is also needed to ensure Australia's future food security, she thinks. However, she also is aware that many scientists think that crop innovation has been stymied by the fear that consumers won't buy genetically modified (GM) products. As a farmer, Sally is frequently asked her opinion about GM crops.

How can Sally communicate her views about the need for GM crops to consumers in a way that is also ethical? Who should Sally be talking with?

Hypothetical Responses to the Guiding Questions

1. What is your purpose or goal (i.e., why do you want to communicate) and on what time scale do you hope to achieve that goal?

Sally wishes to communicate to:

- Share her farming (and broader food production/security) challenges and explain how science/R&D has helped to address many challenges over many decades/over the history of agriculture.
- Keep learning about the community's concerns and knowledge about GM crops. She is often surprised about what she doesn't know about the views and beliefs of different communities, including consumers.
- Encourage greater science/R&D investment in new crop varieties that are adapted to changing climate and other challenges, and to also ensure that Australia's regulations are based on science and keep pace with new tools and technologies.
- Explain why gene technology science is a means to achieve this (e.g. faster times from laboratory to paddock, compared with other plant science options).
- Understand different points of view and allay fears and build confidence about gene technology for food production.
- Explain how farmers in Australia and overseas are growing gene technology derived crop varieties and the outcomes these have delivered.

¹ Gene Technology Ethics & Community Consultative Committee [Guidance for Communicating on Gene Technology 2025](#)

² The scenario is realistic but the name is fictional.

Sally sees this as a long-term communication challenge, although she would like to see more funding investment/new projects in the next two-three years... *(the reader, on further reflection, may have additional responses)*

2. With whom do you wish to engage—that is, who is your audience or target?

Sally has a number of target audiences:

- Fellow farmers – she would like to see more farmers aware of the gene technology options and advocating for more investment in gene technology plant science.
- Developers/research agencies – she would like to see more ‘developers’, developing gene technology plant varieties for the Australian market, and in doing so, having confidence in Australia’s regulatory system and path-to-market, as well as Aussie farmers adopting new varieties. These organisations include seed companies, plant breeding organisations, universities and science/research organisations.
- Funders – she would like to see funding agencies (such as the Rural Research and Development Corporations and Departments of Agriculture) investing in gene technology science.
- Policy makers – she would like to see policy makers showing confidence in gene technology science and regulation (and avoiding non-science political debates).
- Agriculture advocacy/membership bodies – she would like to see her farming representative bodies (such as state farming associations and national commodity organisations) more engaged on this issue to advocate for greater investment in, and effective regulation of, gene technology.
- Media – the media is both a communication vehicle and a target audience. Sally would like to see key media outlets (rural, regional and metropolitan) looking to share science-based information, not creating headlines from non-science-based claims.
- Community – she would like to see the community ‘comfortable’ rather than fearful of crop varieties developed from gene technology – and ‘comfortable’ with eating food derived from these.

3. How can you ensure that your communication is transparent and that you are open about assumptions and uncertainties, benefits and risks?

- Sally can tell her own ‘on farm’ story – which is a true/factual story.
- She is going to look to source science-based data to provide references, case studies etc.
- She is going to be honest about farmer experiences – for example, she knows that when GM cotton was first introduced it took some time for farmers to work with seed companies, agronomists and the broader industry to get the best out of the new varieties. This is often the case with any new crop variety, and she will explain this story and how farmers worked together with the industry to best ‘deploy’ this new technology on their farms. She feels it is not dissimilar to how people took a while to adapt to mobile telephones when they first came out (and how they are used for so many different reasons).

- Sally is going to refer questions she does not have the answers to/experience about to the relevant expert/expert organisation and/or source science data and fact sheets where she can.

4. Are you communicating based on your specific expertise, and what evidence will you use to ensure that your claims are accurate and can be externally fact checked?

Accepting that she does not have all the knowledge at her fingertips, Sally has identified a number of individuals/entities who she sees can assist in providing communication support – e.g. by sharing information within their areas of expertise/their experience. These ‘helpers’ include:

- A scientist from a national research organisation who can talk about different types of plant science and how gene technology science compares with other plant breeding tools.
- A neighbour/cotton farmer from the Darling Downs - who has grown GM cotton since 2010 and can explain how this works ‘on farm’ in their farming business.
- A grower advisor from the cotton peak industry body – who can explain how the cotton industry has managed and overseen GM cotton in Australia since it was developed and introduced, including how it is sold and marketed.
- A representative from the relevant regulator, the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator (OGTR), who can explain how this plant science is regulated in Australia.
- A farmer from Cootamundra, who Sally met at a farmers’ association meeting - who has grown GM canola for five years.
- An agronomist from a leading farming systems group – who reviews a lot of farm data in the Wimmera region and can talk about why farmers opt or don’t opt to grow GM canola and the on-farm results observed over the past decade.
- A grain trader who sells Australian grain including GM canola into overseas and domestic markets to discuss customer perception, how customer perceptions/demands are met, and how to improve the acceptance of GM products by the end consumer.

Sally can also reach out to national commodity/farming organisations to seek their support in the provision of information, including research reports and fact sheets. This may also provide her with a link to a broader network of farmers who can share their stories and experiences.

Sally can draw on these examples when she is asked to provide commentary. She can also talk about the changing farming environment she faces in the Darling Downs and why she believes more investment in gene technology science can deliver varieties with ‘in-built’ solutions – e.g. wheat varieties that can grow with less water.

5. How can you move away from simply giving people information — which assumes that the problem is their lack of knowledge and has been shown to rarely work — and instead, have two-way conversations and shared reflection between you and the target audience?

Sally is hoping that by engaging with all the entities listed at Question 4 (above) she can utilise a wide range of approaches. While this is not a complete list, she has thought of the following ideas:

- Major Field days – for farmers and the media.

- Farm days – e.g. Regional Updates (hosted by R&D Corporations), Farming Systems Field Days (e.g. walk through crops etc).
- Discussions/community/group meetings – to engage interested people. This could be physical events and/or online events and/or media broadcast events and include a variety of spokespeople.
- Agriculture Shows to engage city-based audiences.
- Popular television shows addressing rural issues or cooking shows.
- Utilising social media – to engage with a broader community to provide an authentic story about her farm, the changing operating environment and how new crops and plant technologies will allow her farm to adapt and continue into the future.

Sally has read about Australia's First Consensus Conference on Gene Technology. She would like to do something like this, but as a single voice/farmer in the Darling Downs she doesn't have the capacity to organise this. She will raise this with a range of entities.

6. What forms of media and forums are the best for communicating your message and why?

Sally intends to target:

- Print media that is rural and regional (e.g. local newspapers - many of which now have Facebook pages/digital footprints), metro and special interest women's and rural interest magazines
- Talks at events run by community organisations that are active in rural and regional areas. These will provide her the best opportunity to hear other people's views, to exchange ideas, and to build relationships and trust.
- Radio – rural regional through national and local broadcasters (e.g. local talk back) and metro.
- Television – national and regional broadcasts focussing on rural shows (watched by many city-based people).
- Social media – Sally believes that X (formerly Twitter), Facebook and TikTok would help to encourage a broad conversation, however, she does not have the capacity to manage all this and manage her farm etc, so she is going to ask the entities she has identified in Question 4 above if they can assist with this.
- Sally also thinks she might enrol in a social media course to better understand how these tools work and possibly try and do some media/presentation training. She does have a Facebook and TikTok account and is going to try to use these to share more of her on farm stories/on farm challenges. She might even be able to make some short videos featuring some of her near neighbours who share her views and experiences.

These media outlets provide a means for Sally to communicate but also to understand the views of others, particularly through specific channels such as talkback radio.

7. What values, meanings, attitudes, beliefs, or other underlying considerations should be articulated when crafting your communication plan and the language used within it?

- Sally aims to engage in honest communication and always listen to what people are saying (listen and respond, rather than dismiss).
- Sally is aware that she has expert agriculture/food production knowledge that many do not have, so she may have to provide a lot of background about this, about how farmers operate. Sally will also avoid using acronyms and scientific jargon – i.e. she will explain this to non-agricultural audiences in non-technical terms where she can (for example, even the word ‘agronomy’ may be unfamiliar to non-farming audiences). She will use plain, conversationalist language that requires no specialist education. She appreciates that different audiences will have different understandings and beliefs and she will try and change her communication to suit the audience where she can.

8. Given the rapid pace of developments in gene technology research, how can your communication strategy be designed to remain relevant and valid for as long as possible?

- Sally is going to do her best to stay up to date with new plant science tools and technologies. She will try and read as much as she can from science-based sources, however, she is going to have to rely on other experts – such as scientists in the field/particular disciplines – to help to ensure her information remains up-to-date and accurate.
- Sally also believes that farmers are only ‘one part’ of this story, so others in the supply chain (as identified at Question 4) also need to play a role/take some responsibility. Sally will also be looking to these entities to identify new communication tools, technologies and techniques.

9. What are likely to be the most effective and ethical strategies for communicating about gene technology in the face of mis/disinformation and fake news?

- Sally wishes to provide factual, science-based information that is relevant to her target audiences.
- Sally knows that she does not have all the facts/information at her fingertips, as she has not been involved in developing the science. However, she can share her own experiences (which may have included growing GM crops on her farm).
- Sally acknowledges that in order to deliver effective and ethical communication, she will need to call on the assistance of a range of experts to assist her in delivering fact-based information.
- Sally knows that she is not abreast of all the concerns about gene technology so she will need to seek out and listen to a range of perspectives in order to address these.

Version Control Table:

Version	Author	Date	Changes
1.0	GTECCC	21/11/2025	Version 1.0 Final