

## Communicating via the media about a milestone in the development of saline-resistant wheat – Scenario C

### Case Study to Guidance for Communicating on Gene Technology 2025<sup>1</sup>

John White<sup>2</sup> is the media, communications, and public engagement officer for a major Australian academic research centre focused on creating new solutions for agriculture in response to climate change. The scientists within his centre are at very early stages of their research with gene technology on various plants, with solutions predicted to reach the field and farmer in 15-20 years minimum. John is asked to get press coverage for a recent lab finding about a genetic mechanism in wheat that could permit it to be more saline resistant than traditional varieties. The scientists describe it as making wheat ‘more sustainable’. It is not clear how the mechanism will affect the overall health of the plant.

How should John present this finding to journalists? How can he help them understand the science, why it may be needed and its potential for real-world impacts, and avoid over-promising? How can he help prepare the centre’s scientists to work well with the journalists?

### Hypothetical Responses to the Guiding Questions<sup>3</sup>

#### 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?

John wishes to communicate to:

- Enhance the research centre’s national and global reputation in plant science for climate change.
- Encourage science/R&D investment in gene technology relevant to the centre.
- Explain the eventual aims of the research. At the same time, he wants to be clear that the research is still in its preliminary stages, and that this is a progress announcement rather than an announcement about a commercial product or outcome.
- Explain that the research work is regulated and that risks are assessed and managed... *(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?

- John’s immediate audience is journalists working in print, broadcast and digital media. John understands that centre management wishes to engage with people working in the agricultural and science sectors, so he will target specialist science and agricultural journalists...

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

<sup>2</sup> The scenario is realistic but the name is fictional.

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

John will:

- Advise against using open-ended and imprecise claims like the wheat is “more sustainable” because the term “sustainable” is open to multiple interpretations. Instead, he will advise that the centre focuses on the trait that is being altered by saying, for example, that the researchers are working to develop wheat that can grow at higher saline levels.
- Ensure that all references to risks and benefits are evidence based.
- Ensure that the 15-20-year estimate is part of the communication, and emphasise that the announcement is about success at an early stage in development.
- Include a timeline in the media release that illustrates typical stages of research from the laboratory to eventual release...

**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?**

- The press release contains information from the lead researchers who are experts, which John translates into plain language.
- John fact checks the text for the press release using the peer-review literature and other reliable sources.
- The press release contains links to key sources...

**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?**

- To facilitate a two-way conversation with journalists, John organises a press briefing that journalists can attend in person or online. The lead researchers and the management team — all of whom have been trained to work with the media — will be on hand to respond to questions.
- John also suggests that the lead scientist considers presenting their findings at the upcoming annual Australian grains industry conference, where they can discuss the findings with industry experts...

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

- John believes that the press release, press briefing and the research centre’s social media will provide the best way to reach science and agricultural journalists, and hence people working in the science and agricultural sectors...

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

- John aims for best-practice honest communication and to always listen to what people are saying (listen and respond, rather than dismiss).
- John is aware that the press release and the press briefing will involve people with different ways of communicating; from highly technical and specialised (scientists) to more general and accessible (journalists). He plans to act as the communication conduit or 'go-between' for the different groups.
- John understands that journalists have different values and attitudes to the researchers. For example, they may be more interested in risk or cost of an eventual product. John will conduct research and meet with the centre experts to prepare for the journalists' questions...

**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?**

- The press release will remain on the research centre's website for several years. John considers adding a sentence to the press release that will note that gene technology is a fast-moving field and provide links to reliable sources that provide updated information such as the OGTR website...

**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?**

- John will ensure that all media interactions are based on relevant, factual, scientifically accurate information that does not overstate the benefits or understate the risks.
- To avoid inadvertently sharing incorrect information, John requires honesty and transparency from project leaders and organisational management in all communications with him and in all media communications.
- John fact checks all information he is told and thinks about the motivations and interests of those providing the information. He considers providing communications training to ensure that the research centre has a skilled, responsible and reflective spokespeople, who are adept at sharing information with non-scientists...

**Version Control Table:**

| Version | Author | Date       | Changes           |
|---------|--------|------------|-------------------|
| 1.0     | GTECCC | 15/12/2025 | Version 1.0 Final |