

SA GROWER

Scientific approach vital for GM debate

POTATOES SA
By ROBBIE DAVIS, CEO

THE use of biotechnology has received a lot of attention in the Australian media lately.

The *Adoption and Impact of Genetically Modified (GM) Crops in Australia: 20 Years' Experience* report provides insights into the reasons why many producers in Australia have adopted and continue to increasingly use crop biotechnology since it became commercially available 20 years ago.

The report shows that since 1996, Australian cotton and canola producers have gained \$1.37 billion worth of extra income and produced an additional 226,000 tonnes of canola that would otherwise not have been grown if conventional crops had been used.

It also states that the cultivation of GM crops has led to more sustainable use of crop protection products, with a reduction of 22 million kilograms of product used. The environmental benefits from the adoption of GM crops

have also resulted in a saving of nearly 27m litres of fuel use, 71,500 tonnes less carbon dioxide being released into the atmosphere and a reduction in food waste.

In Australia, there is not a uniform approach to the cultivation of such crops.

A recent report from the Australian Productivity Commission recommended all GM crop moratoria be lifted, while the United States-based National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine found GM crops did not harm the environment and there was no evidence of health risks from eating their food.

Several independent and government commissioned reports have shown that GM bans or moratoria in SA and Tas have not delivered a marketing advantage, while their producers have missed out on the benefits of access to crop biotechnology in the past 20 years.

But NSW, Vic and WA have opened the door to allow the production of GM canola in recent years, citing confi-

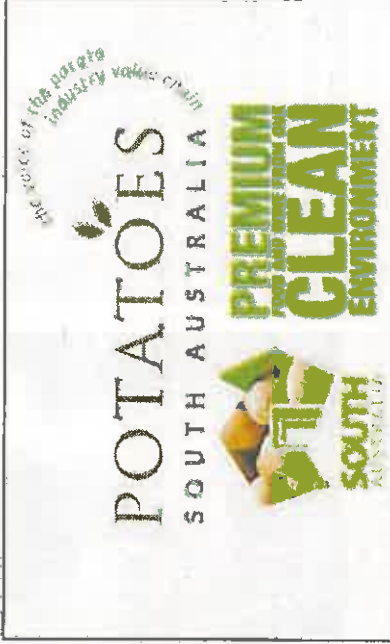
dence in federal regulators, including Food Standards Australia New Zealand. This is an independent statutory authority responsible for food safety and regulation and assesses the health and environmental risks of GM crops and foods, in response to public concerns and debate.

Focusing on potatoes, the US Department of Agriculture recently approved Idaho-based food producer JR Simplot's genetically-modified potato, named Innate. It has permission to cultivate the crop, which is said to produce less of the by-product acrylamide - a proven carcinogen in laboratory animals - and bruise less easily.

FSANZ, which has not identified any public health and safety concerns in its assessment of Innate, has called for public submissions. Chief executive officer Steve McCutcheon said the potato had been modified by inserting genetic sequences from this potato and wild potato varieties, with no new proteins introduced, only a



New technology - including genetic modification - requires review and testing, but concerns should be based on science and evidence, not perceptions and myths.



Potatoes SA is the voice for seed producers, growers, packers, marketers, exporters, wholesalers and retailers.

reduction in expression of four of its own genes. Such cross-species gene transfer can happen in both plant and animal species in nature without human intervention.

FSANZ will make a recommendation to the federal government next year. If we think of GM organisms as plants that have names modified by humans, then many of the plants sold at retail level fit that descrip-

tion. But most of these modifications did not occur in the laboratory.

The real point is this; most consumers have no idea what GM really means. Genetic modification is simply a tool. Like all tools, the end application is what matters.

All new technologies require review and testing, but concerns should be based on science and evidence, not on perceptions, myths and misunderstandings.

While we all avidly support and respect SA's clean, green image, does the use of this technology hold back efficient research and work against our point of difference? Perhaps choice should come into the debate.