

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH

(Reference: Gene Technology Bill)

Members:

**MS K TUCKER (The Chair)
MR B SMYTH
MS K MacDONALD**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

THURSDAY, 28 NOVEMBER 2002

**Secretary to the committee:
Ms S Leyne (Ph: 62050490)**

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

The committee met at 2.10 pm.

GRAHAM DAVID STRONG and

ROSEMARY ELLEN SMITH

were called.

THE CHAIR: I'll start the formal proceedings by declaring this hearing of the Standing Committee on Health open. I will now read you a formal statement about your responsibilities as witnesses.

You should understand that these hearings are legal proceedings of the Legislative Assembly protected by parliamentary privilege. That gives you certain protections, but also certain responsibilities. It means that you are protected from certain legal action, such as being sued for defamation for what you say at this public hearing. It also means that you have a responsibility to tell the committee the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated by the Assembly as a serious matter.

Before we start, would you both state your names please, and the capacities in which you appear?

Mr Strong: I am Graham Strong, a farmer from Narrandera in New South Wales. I am a manager of a farming business.

Miss Smith: I am Rosie Smith. I also live on the farm. I am qualified as an ecologist in the UK.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for spending time with us. Do you wish to address the committee?

Mr Strong: Yes. First, I want to state my reason for addressing the committee: to provide it with information that it can present to the territory government about the current state of gene technology legislation, and the points at which I believe the states and territories should act to protect farmers from a possible release of a GE crop, canola, as early as February 2003.

I am going to be outlining some of the practical concerns about GE canola—farmers' inability to segregate it from non-GE canola, and the downstream impact on farmers who choose to market non-GM, or non-GE, crops in a market that is demanding those crops. With the current state of the regulatory process and legislation, those farmers cannot protect themselves. I am going to be giving some on-the-ground examples that will explain why this is the case, why you cannot segregate GE, and why the cost involved is not being shared by the people who should share that responsibility.

As conventional farmers, we believe that the federal government is being negligent in addressing the problems surrounding the proposed commercial release of genetically modified food crops next year. We are part of the majority of Australian farmers who want to provide GM-free food for the majority of consumers who prefer GM-free food.

The introduction of GM crops is planned for next year, but no consideration has been given to the economic impact of this on the agricultural industry. The plans for this introduction appear to be controlled by the biotech industry.

The regulatory process is administered by the federal Department of Health and Ageing, not by the agriculture portfolio. The decision to pass a GE crop has to go through the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator. This office does not consider economic questions and issues. It has no power to do so. It only looks at environmental and health issues, so any economic impacts are totally out of its jurisdiction.

That responsibility is then passed on to the states and territories, and that means that they then have to make the case for whether they want GE production. They can only look at economics, and the clause covering that is under section 21 of the federal Gene Technology Act. That gives the states and territories the power to declare GE-free zones on marketing grounds. That section is the one that I wish to present to this committee as relevant to the ACT territory government.

I am going to be arguing that the state of the regulatory processes and the general situation make it clear that Australia is not ready to introduce GE crops without adversely affecting people, and without adequate protection that allows farmers to choose a production system that will permit their crops to remain free of contamination.

That is why, in my conclusion, I will say that the ACT government must implement GE-free zones across its whole territory, as a way of introducing a moratorium on these crops until we get some of these issues of contamination, liability and protection for the non-GE grower sorted out. At the moment, we are far from having the issues addressed.

I will now go through some of the problems facing the industry that aren't resolved, and will not be resolved, before the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator has to make the decision about whether to allow a GE canola crop release next year.

When GM crops are irreversibly released, all growers will have to provide proof of their GM status—this is for export—rather than relying on quarantine statements that show that Australian produce is GM free. It will take years to establish the required traceable identity preservation system, and yet the commercial release is scheduled for next year's planting.

The cost of segregating and preserving the existing GM-free identity of Australia's canola crop would add approximately \$42.36 million every year to our costs. Until this process is in place, growers will be required to sign guarantees of zero contamination, which are impossible to comply with because contamination is uncontrollable. I will show you a video that explains why it is uncontrollable. Growers would be crazy to sign declarations that their products are GM free, because the systems—whether it be the marketing system or the handling system for those products—are not in place to adequately cover them against liability.

Uninsurable liability for uncontrolled contamination may extend beyond a truckload worth thousands to rejection of a shipment worth millions, or even a recall of a product worth billions. We've seen an example of that in the United States in StarLink corn. We

don't have any current system of product recall that would equitably deal with those affected by such a recall.

The exorbitant costs, the difficulties and the uninsurable liabilities involved in marketing products as GM free will be increasingly prohibitive, and all growers will be effectively forced to sell on a declining GM market. The problem is that there may not be a market for this product, and many of our markets may be under threat.

The state governments have the power to create GM-free zones under section 21 of the federal Gene Technology Act 2000. Once a GM crop is released, we will find it virtually impossible to reclaim our GE-free status, because of the physical nature of canola—the way it spreads—and the lack of a system to adequately deal with that spread. Also, the cost of a shire or a zone guaranteeing that it was GM free would be extremely high once a GM product was released in that zone. That is why I am pushing for a whole-of-state approach to a GM-free zone.

The decision about how to manage the release of GM crops is made by the Gene Technology Grains Committee. This is a committee from which the Plant Industries Committee, a federal government committee, receives advice on grain handling and marketing issues with regard to GE crops. This committee is heavily loaded with biotech industry representatives. Over 25 per cent of this committee is made up of biotech corporation representatives.

As someone in the industry whose markets are at stake, I find it totally unacceptable that the committee that is supposed to be representing grain handling and marketing interests with regard to GE—and which will decide how to segregate or how to coexist—has representatives of biotech companies as voting members. At best, they should be sources of advice, but not voting members—they have a substantial vested interest in such a committee.

Contamination of our existing crops is uncontrollable. The assumption that contamination is controllable is based on a one-year model, which presumes that contamination can be controlled within the 1 per cent tolerance level of labelling legislation. However, farming is considered a long-term industry and contamination in crops will increase over time, because genetically engineered crops possess a dominant pattern of gene that is transferable by uncontrollable pollen and direct seed transfer.

The spread of contamination will increase as a result of the selectiveness of Roundup-ready canola, which is resistant to the most commonly used farming chemical, glyphosate. It is not possible to eradicate contamination from certified seed stocks of non-GM canola used for planting the following year's non-GM crop. Every effort was made to keep the Canadian certified non-GM seed stocks free from GM contamination yet, only five years after GM introduction, when seed stocks were tested for GM presence, only two out of the 14 varieties were not contaminated, the worst sample registering an unacceptable 7.2 per cent of contamination.

Such figures mean that a release in Australia would be a huge experiment in our climate. I believe that the contamination problem could be worse in Australia than in Canada. I don't have any scientific proof of that, but I base my assumption on my experience as a farmer, and on the fact that we have longer growing seasons. We don't know how

contamination will spread. We don't know how quickly plants such as weeds will develop resistance to Roundup. We just don't have those answers in Australia, so it will be a big gamble if it's released commercially here.

The cheaper, faster testing techniques that will be available at receiver points only register GM contamination over 1 per cent, whereas more expensive, time-consuming and accurate testing techniques would be used by the buyers. This logistical problem may be the reason many of the buyers have established a contamination tolerance level of 1 per cent.

However, with improvements in testing techniques, the tolerance levels can be lowered. The European Union is currently lowering its legislated labelling contamination tolerance level from 1 per cent to 0.5 per cent. Again, you can see that it could be a case of buyer beware, because of the testing technique. No-one's going to guarantee a threshold of 0.5 per cent if the testing technique can only detect 1 per cent at the time, cost effectively.

I am now going to show you a video of canola being harvested.

(A video was then shown.)

Mr Strong: There's a harvester, harvesting and distributing the crop. Because this year is such a drought year, as you are aware, many farmers chose to direct head their crops with a conventional front that goes on the machine. What they normally do is windrow the crop, as you would with hay, and then pick it up. That reduces the possibility of the wind carrying the crop away, as it sometimes can. If you've just got it like that, the wind can blow it and scatter the seed everywhere.

You can see the canola coming in. We try to get most of it but, in a drought year, the crop is so thin that it's a mechanical problem. You cannot get it to feed into the machine properly, and sometimes 10 or 20 per cent of it—that's a fair bit of it—ends up either breaking off at the cutter bar and shattering on the ground, or just getting blown off. You are aiming to get 80 per cent of what's there, but it's just a mechanical fact that you cannot get it all. From those pods and things that are flying off, seeds would be going everywhere.

The relevance to GE canola is, if this was Roundup-ready or it was another herbicide-tolerant canola crop, you are going to have masses of seeds of that crop left on the ground after the crop is harvested. Those will germinate in summer and in the autumn of the following year. They will also germinate years down the line. They will germinate for up to five years. I'll show you some pictures later on of "canola volunteers" coming up in another crop.

THE CHAIR: So "volunteers" means seedlings?

Mr Strong: Volunteers means seedlings from this crop that will come up next year and the year after, and those seedlings will be tolerant to Roundup, glyphosate or the other brands the other biotech companies are using. It will be tolerant to that. You therefore have a problem the next year. You may want to sow a wheat crop, but you will have Roundup-resistant volunteers, so you can't use Roundup to kill the volunteers, as a lot of

farmers would. It's cheap and it's a lot less toxic than other chemicals used as broad-spectrum sprays, sprays which kill all the weeds.

To get rid of those volunteers, you have to use another chemical, such as 2,4-D ester, which is highly volatile. It's more volatile, you can breathe it in, it's more toxic than Roundup and more expensive.

THE CHAIR: Are you using the canola as a rotating crop?

Mr Strong: We use the canola as a rotating crop.

THE CHAIR: That's why it's a problem.

Mr Strong: If you don't rotate your crops, you can get a lot of disease. It's also just a fact of life: farmers want to grow three, four or five different crops, to get market advantages and to hedge their risk. Most farmers spray such volunteers with Roundup or something like that. In this case, the Roundup won't work. You have to buy a more expensive and more toxic chemical. That is why this matter is relevant to this committee, which looks at health and environmental issues. This Roundup-ready canola will not save chemicals. I believe it will not save chemicals in Australia.

The other fact of life is herbicide resistance. If, after a few years of sowing, you are just spraying one chemical on a crop and the canola becomes tolerant to the chemical, eventually you are going to select for plants that are resistant to that chemical. We already have Roundup-resistant rye-grass in Australia. There are also plants such as marsh mallows and other weeds that normally wouldn't be such a problem that, because of their physiology—the thickness or hairiness of their leaves—have suddenly become resistant because they have been sprayed with Roundup all the time, and other systems haven't been used. Then you have to come back and use other chemicals to kill them.

The saving in chemicals has not been demonstrated, and certainly not in Australia. You might get three or four years where you're using less chemicals. Often, the figures I have seen that are touted around claiming a so-called decrease in chemical use in the United States and Canada are only based on the first three years after the release of the crop. We're often not seeing the figures for the last two years. I have a study here that was done by the Soil Association, copies of which I will hand out to the committee members, which points out that, after a few years, chemical costs and chemical applications don't really change. Certainly, that has been the case for Bt crops.

For some of the crops, there has been a slight decrease in insecticide use on a per acre basis. However, an interesting point in the Soil Association report about insecticide use was that, with the Bt corn, the actual amount of insecticide applied per acre did drop initially, but the total amount of insecticide applied to the national corn crop—other varieties of herbicide came into it as well—actually went up.

This was the case because a lot of farmers who hadn't been spraying their corn crops at all were suddenly looking at their fields again, because of all the hype and everything in the media about GM crops and Bt. Normally, they wouldn't spray, but they'd look and think, "I'd better go and have a look for corn borers." They would have a look, find a couple, and then think, "I have to spray it." They might have had a biological control

action happening in that field. They might have had some loss to corn borers and things like that, but not enough to make it worth growing the Bt variety or spraying insecticide, so they didn't worry about it. They were quite happy with that system.

However, suddenly, when all the hype from agronomy, from the departments and from the chemical companies increased, they began to think that they had to spray it, because that is the latest thing to do. It is driven by that whole mass technological ideology that is shoved at society. That sort of societal information you can't find in a scientific trial plot. It's a very, very complex issue, GE crops. You can't just look at one crop and say, "Insecticide costs for Bt corn in the United States have dropped." You have to look at the big picture.

THE CHAIR: Has anything happened with Bt cotton? Do you have anything on Bt cotton?

Mr Strong: I don't have anything on Bt cotton. I'm not going to comment on Bt cotton. I was just using that Bt corn example to demonstrate that making decisions on purely scientific grounds and making decisions in the real world can be quite different. Things such as stewardship programs for growing GE canola, which Monsanto is talking about now—putting those who grow GE canola through QA assurance schemes and all these managerial processes—they don't deal with the fact that, out there in the real world, farmers, processors and handlers actually have to think for themselves.

If you start boxing everyone up into this managerial approach to everything in life, people shut down and think, "That's the way I act, because that's what's written there. They are the rules and those are what I'm following." People don't think for themselves. People forget that we can harvest 150 hectares of wheat after our last canola crop, and still get canola seed in the sample from the harvester.

If I was following the guidelines, I wonder if they'd tell me that the spiral inside the front gets chock-a-block full of canola seed, especially when there's a drought, because the crop's so light and because the pods shatter very easily—most of them shatter when they come in the front. Because it is a drought, because everything is so brittle, because you're direct heading the crop, you get so much of the stuff in the spiral that it then flings out all the time as you're harvesting. Then, 150 hectares later, it's still in the sample.

You're not going to get that sort of information from a six-week trial—putting GE canola through the system—and you're not going to get it from a modelling process. It's a drought.

I want to pass this around. You'll have to look carefully. It is in there.

Miss Smith: If you hold your hand completely under the auger you get a whole handful of canola.

Mr Strong: If you can't see it, I'll point it out for you. The testing procedure would certainly pick that up and it would be far greater than 1 per cent, I'll tell you that. This is the thing, this does not just apply to canola. A lot of fuss has been made by proponents of GE about the organics industry. They say, "You don't grow much canola in Australia anyway, so it's irrelevant." We grow wheat, we grow all the other crops. Canola can get

into every other crop and, once that crop has a trace of GE canola in it, that shipment has a level of GE. It could be a completely different crop. It could be honey. It could be any crop. That's the canola.

Miss Smith: Do you want me to start the video again?

Mr Strong: Yes, you can start the video again. That's just tipping some out. He dumped it all out before I had the camera out.

MR SMYTH: What is the second sample, Graham?

Miss Smith: That's just canola, to show what it looks like.

Mr Strong: That has a fair bit of admix in it. A lot of canola is like that before it gets processed anyway. Also, when you're in drought conditions, one of the things you can save on is chemicals, because the weeds really don't compete that well. Conventional farmers could spend a lot of money spraying their crop and do a lot of damage to the environment, too, which is one of the things we try to eliminate. We still use some chemicals, but we're trying to drop them out in our farm business.

It's not usually economical to spray a crop for weeds in a drought, because the weeds don't necessarily compete with the crop much when it's dry. The crop usually gets a head start. You don't want to spray a crop just for cosmetic value in a drought, because in a drought the demand for grain is so high that there's very little difference between the grades. There's no sense in spraying a crop just to get a few volunteer canola plants in it. It just doesn't make economic sense. It certainly doesn't make environmental sense.

However, if a farmer has grown canola before on his property, or even if it's been grown next door and all the seeds have blown over, there will be a small scattering of canola plants through his crop. If he suspects that that's GE canola and he's worried about it—he doesn't want GE canola because they're testing for it and he doesn't know where that shipment is going—you can bet your life he's going to race out and spray that crop, even though it's not economical to spray, and even though it's not environmentally right to spray. He now has a third reason to consider, and you can bet that it will increase the odds that he'll have to spray.

If you have a malt barley sample, it has to be fairly clean. However, the market will buy anything in a drought, as long as it meets the protein requirement. It is supply and demand. However, if a barley crop has GE canola in it, even a smattering of it, the farmer is going to spray it. While, in a few years, you might see a drop in chemical use with this GE canola, for argument's sake, over time any benefit from that will be diminished vastly because of the fear of having GE in your sample, and all these other dimensions. We won't be able to trace this back to an increase in chemical use as a result of the introduction of GE products, but I can tell you that it will be the case.

THE CHAIR: Do you know if there are any data on Australian conditions and canola, or is that work all done overseas on overseas conditions?

Mr Strong: I would be out of my depth if I commented about the data for canola and how it grows in relation to Canada—the length of time it grows—

THE CHAIR: You don't know if any research is being done?

Mr Strong: No, I don't know if there is any research being done.

Miss Smith: The CSIRO has trial crops growing at the moment, so they'd be the people to go to for that information.

Mr Strong: In Australia, we do have a longer growing season.

We do have Roundup-resistant rye-grass already, so any short-term benefit that people might think they're getting with Roundup-ready products is going to go out the window once they start getting resistant rye-grass. Sure, they might get a great crop in a couple of years, but will they be able to sell it, and will they be able to afford the cost of segregation, which will have to happen because the EU is demanding GE-free products. The EU has legislation which demands labelling, so they need a proportion of GE-free canola.

Admittedly, Europe is a static market for Australia. However, this doesn't mean that that market is not going to stabilise once we can guarantee that our product is GE free. It's market demand. It's not necessarily the premium that is important: it's market access for our product. Europe has bought—these are Bureau of Statistics figures for the average over the last five years—13.5 per cent of our canola. The last two years have been—I would have to check my references to say that. I'm not going to say that. I would be going out of my depth.

Anyway, 13.5 per cent over five years is nothing to make a joke of or throw away. That's going to be a market advantage in the future. Remember that, once GE canola is released, there's no going back. If the segregation system and the coexisting system, for which these committees such as the Gene Technology Grains Committee are supposed to be developing protocols, are voluntary codes, if they don't work if there is a stuff-up, we've lost it. We cannot guarantee to provide GE-free products. However, I would argue that, if we can place a moratorium on GE canola, then we may have time to iron out a lot of these issues.

THE CHAIR: Yes. Suggestions such as cleaning the header, is that—

Mr Strong: It's not possible. It is physically impossible.

Miss Smith: The video demonstrated that.

Mr Strong: This is what I was demonstrating here.

Miss Smith: Should we play this again?

Mr Strong: Yes, we'll keep going with this. This is just tipping it into the silo.

MS TUCKER: Yes, the silos are an issue too, aren't they?

Mr Strong: Yes. These are, say, on a farm. A lot of farmers might store their canola on the farm. The video shows, though, that a lot of these have augers in them and holes in them. That's a fairly new one. That's a fairly good one. I have another one that has holes in it that the canola comes out.

When farmers are growing grain, they are racing against the weather because, if it rains, the whole crop could be down-valued. They want to get that crop off as quickly as they can. If they're not watching points where the seed might escape, then you can bet their drivers aren't and the truck drivers aren't, and whoever else is down the road sticking to some voluntary quality assurance program isn't. It's a bit of a joke, really. It's okay on this video, but out in the field you see the volunteer canola growing, and the seed going everywhere. From this place up to the silos where the canola is dumped, canola is growing right up the roadside.

Mind you, shire councils often use Roundup, glyphosate, to spray their roadsides. That won't kill the GE canola. The farmer over the road will say, "You get rid of that canola, otherwise we're going to get together and refuse to pay our rates." They have to come, because I don't want the shit blowing on my place, as it will. I'm worried about getting it in the crop and the liability, and all these unresolved issues. You have to remember that these are unresolved issues. I'm saying some of them will never be resolved without a completely closed system for GE canola. We should either have that, or no GE products at all.

Can a closed system work? That's highly questionable and, I would say, impossible, because it means controlling pollination, which is a another issue altogether.

MR SMYTH: That's the reality. They can't coexist, can they?

Mr Strong: They can't coexist. I don't believe they can coexist at all, unless they are hundreds and hundreds of miles apart and have completely closed systems. However, if you're talking about a gradual introduction of GE canola into the mainstream growing areas of canola, you have to understand that canola is grown right through the state of New South Wales down to the outskirts of this territory, I believe—I am 100 per cent sure—and right down to Victoria. The canola growing region runs right through here. If GE canola got right through there, it's ridiculous to say that a neighbour of a GE grower could choose to grow a non-GE crop and not have any extra cost.

Who covers the cost of even trying to segregate, coexist and manage pollen drift? The non-GM growers will have to wear that cost, whether they like it or not. This is the biggest problem with the regulatory system. There is a huge imbalance in responsibility for liability between the biotech companies and the downstream industries and farmers. If this gets in, everyone will have to pay for it.

You're dealing with a system where the companies that want to make the money out of a product are unwilling to pay for the costs downstream. They can affect everyone's market. Whether crops mix up or not, there will be testing costs, which could be 10 per cent of the farm gate value of canola.

MR SMYTH: And everybody will have to test it.

Mr Strong: Everyone will have to pay for that, whether they grow GE crops or not.

THE CHAIR: Privatised the profit and socialised the cost.

Mr Strong: That's right. Exactly.

THE CHAIR: Yes. It's familiar.

Mr Strong: Over 25 per cent of the committee which develops the so-called protocols for managing coexistence is now made up of representatives of the biotech industry. That's like having multinational food companies sitting on a board for grocery retailers and supermarkets. In any other industry, that system wouldn't last two seconds.

THE CHAIR: Are other farmers concerned about this in your area?

Mr Strong: Yes. Eighty per cent of the farmers polled for the South Australian Farmers Federation wanted a moratorium on GE crops. You can't read a newspaper in the rural press for a single day without finding an article about GE crops, from both sides of the argument. If you type in "GE crops" on a search engine on the Internet, hundreds and hundreds of references come up.

The Victorian Farmers Federation's excuse for not doing a similar survey in Victoria, and the New South Wales Farmers Association's excuse for not doing a survey of growers in New South Wales, was that farmers don't know enough about the issue. There were basically saying that farmers are too ignorant, and they've been saying that for weeks. They are trying to stall any idea of a moratorium. They say farmers are too ignorant, they don't know, they don't have the facts and they're getting too emotional—that kind of thing. That's completely wrong—80 per cent wanted a moratorium.

THE CHAIR: What has the process been in the Grains Committee? Has it been open and transparent, and consulted with farmers?

Mr Strong: Submissions were invited. Anyone could make submissions to the Gene Technology Grains Committee on its draft framework for coexistence, so yes, it is transparent. However, I'm not sure of the number of submissions received. I have seen quite a few of them. I have the document there. That is the draft framework, the draft for discussion.

THE CHAIR: Were you happy with that?

Mr Strong: No. It's completely wishy-washy, and doesn't address any of the issues. I have a critique of it here that states my position.

THE CHAIR: Okay. Can we table this?

Mr Strong: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr Strong: Yes. It doesn't deal adequately with the process at all, seeing that companies have applied to the OGTR for licences to release products next year. There are so many unresolved issues that any talk about a release next year is just—that's why the farmers are calling for a moratorium, but the Farmers Association doesn't want to listen to it and doesn't want to know about it.

THE CHAIR: So the Farmers Association is not representing the concerns of up to 80 per cent of its people?

Mr Strong: No, not at all. That's according to the South Australian Farmers Federation's poll.

MR SMYTH: Why not? Why would the Farmers Association be in favour of GM seeds?

Mr Strong: That's a really difficult one for me to answer.

MR SMYTH: All right. Yes, that's true.

Mr Strong: I could tell you why I believe that. It's a cultural issue, I believe. I would be reluctant to discuss any of the other reasons for fear of saying something libellous.

THE CHAIR: You fear legal action? You're actually covered by privilege here, but that is fine.

MR SMYTH: No, I understand.

Mr Strong: Oh, okay.

THE CHAIR: However, we ask you to be careful with that privilege.

MR SMYTH: Graham, do you understand the concept of privilege?

Mr Strong: Yes, I've read some of the fine print.

THE CHAIR: In the public interest, you do have the right to make certain statements that normally would be considered defamatory. What I suggest you do, if you want to, is give us something in writing which would attract privilege if the committee so decided. That way, you could consider what you say. I think that is probably more sensible.

Mr Strong: I think that is better.

THE CHAIR: The committee will look at whatever you give us, so you can do it that way.

Mr Strong: In many respects, we are lucky to have farmers organisations and other bodies representing farmers but, with this issue, for some reason there has been blunt rejection of the views of the farmers at the grassroots level. It's almost intense, and it occurs across the board within all the state farming organisations and the NFF.

They're just going into the silos with the truck. Did you see the auger with the canola leaking out of it?

Miss Smith: Yes, it is coming out of the side.

Mr Strong: Yes. That could be considered a pretty reasonable auger on some farms, and it is letting this stuff go everywhere. A lot of farmers are just out there trying to make their living and, unfortunately, although I have a great deal of respect for farmers, I think that they tend to trust people about issues such as these. They're very naïve about a lot of things. They seem to trust their industry leaders to direct them on most things, until some big things happen and then they'll get up and start voting.

Even on such important issues as those in the wool industry, we really haven't seen huge percentages of farmers voting. We're getting a big enough percentage to be statistically relevant, but farmers typically are just trying to pay their debts, run their farms and grow crops that are profitable, and they trust their industry leaders to make decisions, especially about things such as gene technology.

You have to remember that a lot of the people who make decisions on these farming organisations have been on them for 20 or 30 years. They're very much in the system. It's a highly charged political arena. They are used to that arena. A lot of them probably think that they're doing the right thing. It's an extremely conservative arena and times are changing. It is not the 1950s.

THE CHAIR: Would you just explain something to me? Is the machinery that you just showed the committee shared between farms sometimes?

Mr Strong: Yes. In fact, I have a document to table about that from the Grain Harvesters Association.

THE CHAIR: Is it normal practice that machinery is shared? If that's the case, then that would be another economic impact.

Mr Strong: Yes, certainly. A lot of farms share that machinery either by leasing it to each other or through farming partnerships.

MR SMYTH: Do you contract out the harvester that you own?

Mr Strong: Yes. We don't contract ours, but we have harvested other peoples' crops in the past.

MR SMYTH: If you harvest the crop of somebody who has GM canola with your machine, you will then bring GM canola back onto your farm on your machine.

Mr Strong: Yes, absolutely. I have a submission to the Gene Technology Grains Committee from the Australian Grain Harvesters Association, so I'm going to table that as well. That is from the contract harvesters association. That is from people who are even more experienced than me in harvesting, contamination and cleaning down machinery. That will be very interesting for the committee to look at.

MR SMYTH: It's practically impossible to clean down a machine.

Mr Strong: Impossible, especially when you deal with things that only people with real experience can understand, such as, because of the shattering in a light year, having certain parts of machinery will fill up with grain, which then spins out into the other grain later on. Agriculture is a very non-linear domain. There are so many skills, perceptions and other things that you require to understand agriculture as a whole.

MR SMYTH: So harvesters visit different farms and may transfer genetically modified seed.

Mr Strong: Yes.

MR SMYTH: The trucks that pick it up visit different farms and may also carry the seed.

Mr Strong: Yes.

MR SMYTH: Then the silos that the grain is stored in—you would assume that they're separated—

Mr Strong: Yes, they are.

MR SMYTH: But once something's contaminated, it's contaminated.

Mr Strong: Yes. You'll have to duplicate everything: trucks and other machinery. There will be extra costs for the handling industry, because they will have to spend time cleaning out equipment. I don't believe it'll work, anyway.

MR SMYTH: Is the majority of grain then transferred from silo to market by train, or is it still going by truck?

Mr Strong: It depends where you live. If you live in an area that's not on a branch line, an active rail line—and more and more are shutting down every year because of privatisation—you have to truck that grain. Whatever grain it is, that's an increased cost. I'm lucky to live near a railway line that's still active, but a lot of people don't. Their freight costs are much higher. Because they're using trucks, because they might have to take any canola that needs testing further than the delivery point, because the closest delivery point may not have the facilities, there are extra costs involved.

MR SMYTH: Then, when the truck or the train gets to the port, and they load the grain into the ship that might take it to Europe, there's no guarantee that the hold of the ship has been cleaned out.

Mr Strong: Exactly, so they'll have to be testing all the way. That's why I say a truckload could be rejected right up to a product recall, which could cost billions of dollars.

THE CHAIR: You said there was a recall of StarLink corn? Was that what you called it? What was that story?

MS MacDONALD: That was on that television show on SBS. It was because it wasn't fit for human consumption and it actually got into the other crops.

MR SMYTH: It's in the ACF briefing papers.

THE CHAIR: Okay, don't worry about that.

Mr Strong: It was basically an unapproved product that was released. It contained a gene that hadn't been adequately tested and it got mixed up in the food supply, and contaminated hundreds and hundreds of thousands of tonnes.

MR SMYTH: Because we currently don't have GM canola, are we seen as a preferred producer? Is there a economical benefit in that? Is that a big plus for our produce?

Mr Strong: There's not so much a price premium, but there is definitely market access for our canola.

THE CHAIR: Would you explain what that means?

Mr Strong: A certain amount of mingling is going on between GM and non-GM canola in Japan and places such as that. Some of that goes on because it doesn't matter what the GE status of the grain is. In that case, it is more, say, the oil content, the oil type and the quality control that is important. However, then there are certain areas of the market that require GM-free grains. I would probably be out of my depth if I discussed the marketing. I have it all in these notes here, but—

THE CHAIR: We have markets that we wouldn't have if we did not have GE-free grain, that's what it means.

Mr Strong: That's it. It's not so much the price. It's that they either take it, or they won't and they'll take it from North America instead. It's the same price. Canola prices have been pretty much set around the world by the Winnipeg futures exchange. However, as the sources of GM-free canola become more and more scarce, you could probably expect to see price premiums on that grain.

Really, market access is more important than premiums. There is a meat facility in southern New South Wales, a feed lot—we have the relevant document here—that has a \$30 million export contract to Japan. Part of that contract certifies that the cattle from which that meat came were not fed GM grain. While we don't have any GM crops, that's easy, that's market access. The United States could just flood the world with pork and things like that overnight. It's not so much the price, it's the access—they want ours. That contract is a tiny proportion of the whole market, but it's 700 jobs in that particular town. It's a major industry.

MR SMYTH: You said earlier that, in some cases, GM markets are declining. What do you base that on?

Mr Strong: I have a reference in the back of these notes, which I can get to you.

THE CHAIR: Did you have slides that you want to show us?

Miss Smith: Yes. We're running out of time, aren't we?

THE CHAIR: Yes, we're running out of time.

(Slides were then shown.)

Mr Strong: This shows a neighbouring property which had a canola crop that just died. It failed. This was after the farmer had sprayed it with pre-emergent herbicide and had sprayed the wild oats out of it. The canola was only tiny, but there were masses of wild oats. He sprayed it, put nitrogen on it, put everything on it, and it eventually died because he was trying to farm 6,000 hectares on his own. He was trying to do too much and doing a pretty shocking job of it. He got terrible germination and all these weeds. He hasn't been managing resistance in weeds or managing in any way other than pouring on the chemicals.

He was starting to get resistant weeds and kept spraying all the time. He used about twice as much chemical as us, and yet got this failed canola crop. You saw the one we were harvesting before, in the same year. That is basically bare ground. The crop just died. There was nothing in it and that paddock is now blowing away. He should have been sowing just a conservative amount, trying to sow it on time and get it up, and should not have been worrying about spraying the weeds much, which is how we've been managing.

We don't have many weeds because we have the crop in on time and have a bit of crop competition. The few weeds that are there—you saw the canola—are all right. The grain will be accepted, but the crop has a few wild oats and things in it to give the area a bit of ground cover after you harvest it, because the canola stubble wouldn't be enough on its own. You have that decision-making process. The farmer must make a cultural decision about whether to do such things. We use less chemicals. We still harvested 20 tonnes of canola at \$550 a tonne. This farmer harvested nothing off that paddock, but he'd spent all that money on those inputs. We didn't spray any chemicals on ours.

That kind of farming—where you just sow the crop and spray it once—that is the culture to which Roundup-ready products and these GE crops are going to appeal. It is a linear, running-a-crop-like-a-factory mentality. I just wanted to demonstrate that.

This is canola at Agfest last year or the year before. Up there is the silo delivery point, which is to take all the canola from the area. This is the main road going up. You can see canola all the way to the silo on the surrounding roadsides, all the way up the road. It flies off the back of the trucks.

MR SMYTH: The problem then is that next year it will self seed?

Mr Strong: Yes.

MR SMYTH: If it's modified, and across the road in the paddock it's not modified—

Mr Strong: It will crosspollinate with that.

MR SMYTH: If it crosspollinates, you're gone.

Mr Strong: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Councils have to spray it.

Mr Strong: The buffer zone—

MR SMYTH: The councils can't spray it because it's now Roundup resistant.

THE CHAIR: Then they have to spray it with something else.

MR SMYTH: They have to come up with something stronger.

Mr Strong: It's likely to be more toxic.

MR SMYTH: It is a never-ending spiral.

Mr Strong: A never-ending spiral. I am abused at forums and such things if I start talking this way. People say, "You're straying from the facts. You're being emotional. You're being too broad." Yet, if I drive through a dust storm, I know that there's no dust blowing off my place because I've been planting old man saltbush, managing perennial grassland and leaving a few weeds in the paddock so the stubble contains at least a bit of ground cover. I'm being emotional, you know, by thinking and acting like that. There is a blind ideology that can't accept anything else but objectivity, and the people who follow it won't even see the dust storm that's blowing around their ears.

THE CHAIR: You seem quite objective to me.

Mr Strong: It's very linear and industrialist. There's more volunteer canola, and that's volunteer canola coming up in lupins. This is a completely different crop and canola was sown the year before. They're talking about Roundup-ready wheat in Canada and North Dakota. How do you get Roundup-ready canola out of Roundup-ready wheat? You can't, so you've dismissed the whole benefit in the first place.

Yes, that's just a close-up of canola there. Yes, another one. Sorry, I had to put this together very quickly, just drag and drop.

This is the malting barley I was talking about. It was getting dry and we didn't know if we were going to get a crop or not, so we were not going to race out there and spray for a few volunteer canola plants. We didn't want to spend money—I'm arguing from an economic point of view here. Where is the incentive to spray that whole paddock if there were only a couple of canola plants in it before we sowed the crop? We had a few scattered canola plants and, by the way, those canola plants came up in that paddock from a sowing four years before that.

We didn't know if we were going to get a crop, so we were not going to spray that paddock much before, or plough it up to get rid of the canola. However, if we wanted that to go to a GM-free market we could have had a problem. Last week in its chairman's

newsletter, the Australian Barley Board announced that some of its major customers for barley had very big concerns about this matter, and that they would not accept exports from Australia without certificates that declared them GM free.

MR SMYTH: Even though we have no GM crops in Australia, they're already asking for certification?

Mr Strong: Yes, and they will continue to do so because we have trials.

MR SMYTH: Okay. Where does the malting barley go?

Mr Strong: Sorry, I was talking about barley in general. This is just malting barley contracted to an Australian processor, so this isn't an export crop. However, a lot of the feed barleys and other types are definitely export crops. That's not an export barley, but it could be. Yes, they require certificates and they will require certificates if we release it.

MR SMYTH: Is that if we release it or—

Mr Strong: I'll have to check the wording of the newsletter, which I have, and I can give that to you.

THE CHAIR: There have been field trials already.

Miss Smith: That's the same paddock.

Mr Strong: You're not going to bother spraying that if there is just a smattering of it but, if it was GM, you'd be seriously worried about it. You would have unanswered questions about litigation, about what your neighbours are growing, and you would be thinking, "I better not let that get away, because what would happen if my neighbours got it?"

That's canola coming up in the perennial native grassland. It will come up anywhere. It's a pretty tough plant. It has some seeds on it. It will soon be all up the road from here.

I'm sorry I'm picking on my neighbour. I'd better not tell you exactly where I live. He won't like this but, again, this is his wheat crop. This is the kind of agriculture I was talking about: he ploughs and does a hell of a lot of spraying, but because he's trying to farm in a really linear way, he hasn't planted—I think he planted a row of sugar gums in nineteen sixty something. He has planted very few trees and has done very little, and the farm is blowing away. That paddock is blowing away at the moment. There is no native vegetation coming in.

That's full of wild radish, it's just chock a block. You can see the thin strips there. That's hardly worth harvesting. You have wild radish all through there. That sort of farming, that kind of approach, is not relying on good timing of sowing, crop competition and agronomic measures. He has let weeds get away rather than watching them, because he's trying to do too much.

MR SMYTH: Yes, but he might be the sort of farmer who would be interested in Roundup-resistant—

Mr Strong: He is the sort of farmer who would jump on Roundup-ready canola. However, it's only going to offer him a couple of years of benefits because, if there were weeds, the selection pressure would be huge because there would be so many. For the first couple of years it would work well, but after a while he would get resistance.

The other thing is that this wild radish can outcross with canola, and it is possible to get Roundup-ready wild radish. It's a circular, dead-end technology and we need a hugely broad and emotional debate about agriculture. I think GE brings all of this to a head. We're going through the dust storms. We're looking for fixes for agriculture, but the GE path is definitely not one of those fixes. It's the same ideology, the same thinking, that has led to the approach that emphasises productivity—pushing out as much as possible at all costs—forgetting the markets and worrying about that later. It's back to the feeding-the-empire bloody 1950s. That's why we're having dust storms.

Miss Smith: It is treating the symptoms rather than the cause.

Mr Strong: Treating the symptoms rather than the cause, yes.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Do you want to make any other comments? I don't have any more questions, as I've been asking them along the way. Are there any more questions?

MS MacDONALD: No.

THE CHAIR: Do you want to say anything else?

Mr Strong: After saying all that, I want to say that there are solutions to this kind of agriculture, and our farm is profitable. I can give you figures to say that. If my farm was blowing away, then what I'm saying would be rubbish, but I can prove to you that we're highly profitable ourselves and we're not blowing away. We have reduced chemical use and done everything we can.

The other thing I want to say to finish off is that I would like this committee to push for the implementation of section 21 in the federal Gene Technology Act, and to recommend that the ACT becomes a GE-free zone.

THE CHAIR: For environmental release and field trials?

Mr Strong: I am speaking about a commercial release and I would be out of my depth if I talked about field trials. Bear in mind that there will probably be a lot of pressure for field trials in the ACT from certain bodies.

THE CHAIR: You can have confined trials.

Mr Strong: I think you probably can have confined trials, but I am very sceptical of trials that are managed by private corporations. I think genetic engineering, GE crops, the whole thing, should be in the public domain if in any domain.

MR SMYTH: If canola seed gets into the soil, how long will it lie there?

Mr Strong: In the barley that you saw, we hadn't had a crop of canola there for about four years. That's my evidence, but I have heard that it can be anything from one to seven years.

MR SMYTH: If you wanted to destroy it in the soil, could you do that?

Mr Strong: No. I don't know. Not without something—

Miss Smith: Pretty nasty.

MR SMYTH: So it will resist fire, it will resist—

Mr Strong: Okay. Yes. If it's in the soil, you can burn over the top and it's not going to affect it.

Miss Smith: It just joins the seed bank along with everything else.

Mr Strong: You can encourage it to grow by ploughing it up, like that wild radish in there. He'd made an incorrect agronomic decision and he probably ploughed it up a few too many times. Actually, wild radish will be encouraged to grow by nitrogen, by urea. You can actually stimulate it to grow, so a lot of the industrial agricultural policies will actually promote a lot of these weeds. It's actually a recommended practice of mainstream agronomy to stimulate the wild radish to grow by putting a bit of urea out, so then you can kill it and reduce the seed bank.

MR SMYTH: All right, thank you.

THE CHAIR: I know you've travelled a long way, and it's been a very useful submission. Thank you very much for taking the time. Siobhan will send you a transcript of what you said today that you can check.

Mr Strong: I'll get a couple of other documents to the committee. Is that all right?

THE CHAIR: Yes, that's fine.

Mr Strong: Okay.

THE CHAIR: Anything else that you want to add is fine. If you want to cover some of those issues about the farmers organisations and so on, just put it in writing and we can look at that as well.

Mr Strong: Okay. There are some other things that I want to put in writing—material about the markets and such things. I actually meant to have a copy here, but I only have a rough copy. I have all the references on that document for markets and such things.

MR SMYTH: Graham and Rosemary, thanks for making the effort.

The committee adjourned at 3.20 pm.