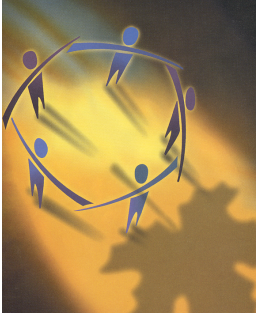

Vancouver Session

HIGHLIGHTS DOCUMENT

WORKSHOP ON GENETICALLY MODIFIED FOOD

Prepared by the Canadian Biotechnology Advisory Committee

April 2, 2001

Opinions and Statements in this Highlights Document are what CBAC heard in the Vancouver multi-stakeholder workshop. This is one of five workshops being held by CBAC across Canada to have input on their Consultation Document on the Regulation of Genetically Modified Food.

Consultation Participants

Stakeholders

Bill Anderson – Aventis CropSciences Canada
Katherine Barrett – Faculty of Law and Environmental Studies - University of Victoria
Dan Wiebe - Rossdown Farms Ltd.
Sara Carten – Community Fraser Health
James Hill – BC Research Inc.
Brian Holl – Lamorna Enterprises Ltd.
George Hamilton – BC Agricultural Council
Jerri Lynn Wilkins – BC-info, Science and Technology Agency
Alex Campbell, Jr. – Thrifty Foods
John J. Kennelly – University of Alberta
Pamela Winquist – Dietician
Keith Mussar – Food and Consumer Products
Farid Makki – Yves Veggie Cuisine
Robert Hancock – University of British Columbia
Susan Crawford – Department of Gerontology – Simon Fraser University
Cayla Runka – Simon Fraser Health Region
Reanne Levson – Community Fraser Health
John Vanderstoep – University of British Columbia
Janice Macdonald – Dieticians of Canada
Evelyn Fox – Consumer's Association of Canada
Paul Stinson – B.C Biotechnology Alliance

Technical Resources

Chris Reynolds – Canadian Food Inspection Agency
William Yan – Health Canada

Canadian Biotechnology Advisory Committee

Suzanne Hendricks
Dr. Mary Alton Mackey
Dr. Peter Phillips

Opinions and Statements in this Highlights Document are what CBAC heard in the Vancouver multi-stakeholder workshop. This is one of five workshops being held by CBAC across Canada to have input on their Consultation Document on the Regulation of Genetically Modified Food.

Canadian Biotechnology Secretariat

Roy Atkinson
Kelly Brannen
Suzanne Fortin

Other

Herb Barbolet – Farm Folk/City Folk – Delivered petition

Stakeholder Workshop Objectives

The current series of stakeholder workshops on Genetically Modified (GM) food has two main objectives:

- To enable stakeholders to explain positions and rationale on key issues, propose and respond to promising policy directions, and describe benefits and consequences of preferred directions.
- To enable stakeholders to identify trade-offs in policy options and values or principles that could underpin decision making.

Themes/Issue Areas

In order to effectively address the various themes and issues and identify and discuss potential ways ahead, stakeholders were divided into four break-out groups. Each group was invited to focus on one theme (i.e., theme A, B, C or D) during the first break-out group session. Theme E was discussed by each group during a second set of break-out groups. Each discussion group was created using a "stakeholder mix" approach, meaning each group ought to have a mix of the perspectives represented (e.g., NGO/Consumer Group, Government, Industry, Academia and Health Industry).

Theme A Good Governance

- Transparency
- Opportunities for public involvement

Theme B Information provision

- Information provision to support informed choice
- Labelling

Theme C Risk and Benefit Considerations

- Environmental stewardship
- Post-market monitoring for risks and benefits

Theme D Regulatory System

- Separation and independences of regulatory functions
- Capability and capacity in the regulatory system
- Ensuring safety during research and development activities

Theme E Social and Ethical Considerations

- Broader social and ethical considerations

For background information on these issues, please refer to the consultation document entitled "Regulation of Genetically Modified Food" available on the CBAC web site at www.cbac-cccb.ca. For each of these themes and issues, the text below summarizes the preferences expressed by participants in the session.

Theme A - Good Governance

Transparency and opportunities for public involvement

With public notification of products entering the regulatory system for review, the public knows the review process is underway and can provide valuable input before final approval is given. It is important to ensure that information is being communicated to distinct publics using clear language appropriate to the intended public (i.e., general, scientific, education, health professionals, NGOs). The information can also be used as an educational tool.

Information and education can take place at different levels, and information should be tailored to these e.g. through general information for non-technical audiences and technical summaries and data for informed communities.

Communicate a detailed summary explaining the regulatory decision immediately on approval of a GM product. Release health and safety assessments with GM food approvals. Summary data related to health and safety matters should be made available using easy to understand language. Additionally, all technical data should be released except in certain circumstances such as where there are confidentiality agreements, exemptions etc…

The underlying values which could assist in developing policy in this area are as follows:

- Transparency – the public has the right to know the process for approvals as well as the information used to make decisions.
- Integrity – the regulators adopting consultative methodologies to maintain an unbiased position and maintain credibility.
- Accountability – stakeholders should be held accountable, especially the scientific and regulatory communities.
- Education – the public has a need to know in order to make informed choices/decisions.

Theme B - Information Provision

Information provision and labelling

There are issues with respect to labelling in general. For instance, the group discussed whether, as a principle, GM food should be labelled or not. The action of labelling foods as genetically modified (GM) may raise consumers' concerns regarding the safety of the foods. On the other hand, labelling would provide clarity for consumers (e.g, as to the nature of the foods that they are consuming).

With respect to mandatory labelling, the group felt that a benefit would be that it would keep Canada in sync with other countries where labelling is mandatory (e.g., New Zealand, Europe, Japan). The downside would be the cost associated with enforcing compliance. The group preferred voluntary labelling as a way forward, on the grounds that industry would become more involved in informing consumers. To work, it would require a rigorous assessment process for safety considerations and very clearly defined standards and goals.

The way ahead with regard to international labelling is to become involved in setting standards internationally. This is in keeping with Canada's aspiration as a trading country. We also need to be able to respond to international requests for source commodity information.

In terms of public education, in the face of misleading information on GM food, the need for public information is critical – both at the point of purchase and in terms of a repository of reliable, neutral information managed by an arms length organization with access to industry sources.

An added challenge identified by the group concerning labelling and information is that we haven't traditionally labelled for food "processes", but usually to describe product attributes (e.g., allergenicity) - particularly the risks.

The underlying values which could assist in developing policy in this area are as follows:

- Food and environmental safety – being rigorous here reduces reliance on labelling.
- Market success – informed acceptance of GM food is important to our success as a trading nation.
- Precautionary principle – there is no such thing as zero risk..
- Informed public – knowledgeable consumers make better/healthier choices.
- Looking ahead – be wise.

Theme C Risk and Benefits Considerations

This section encompasses two subject areas and their real/perceived challenges:

- Environmental Stewardship
- Post-market monitoring

In this theme area, the way forward involved a series of activities. The following discussion outlines the "story line" that was followed in the group's discussion, that is to say, the group discussed the risks and relative benefits of each activity.

Environmental stewardship

There is a need to deepen and broaden the knowledge base with respect to ecosystem science. However, this is not a GM-specific issue. There is a requirement to better integrate knowledge across environmental sectors (e.g., forestry, fisheries, and environment) and share the information. This will allow for effective strategic decision making.

Maintaining and developing the approach with international application will allow us to continue to think globally. This ambitious undertaking will require an initial scoping exercise to determine the size of the overall challenge. Subsequently, strategic investments will be made based on Canadian vested interests and current areas of expertise and utilizing a client-focused approach. Clients should be consulted. What do they really want?

Strengthening of the GM assessment process is needed but must be related to the life-cycle process, product usage and traceability. The approach must be pragmatic, feasible and viewed as part of a preventative process.

If the Life Cycle Approach is adopted, as a first step, there is a need to correctly identify all stakeholders in the process. This approach could become a "best practice". The adoption of this approach would do much to alleviate the negative public perception. However, the feasibility of such an approach may be limited; and informed consumers may question the overall value of the costly investment.

Post-market monitoring of risks and benefits

Long-term scientific studies are not a preventive measure but do provide valuable credibility. Good evaluations require definition of "end points" and risk thresholds. It is difficult to support a technology when no long-term studies have been carried out.

There is a definite requirement for detection methods for purposes of "traceability," trade monitoring and product labelling/identification. It is also a non-tariff trade issue that promotes consumer trust and choice.

Auditing for special conditions is a must but who will pay, and who carry it out? The correct position is necessary for purposes of credibility, accountability, objectivity and responsibility.

Before monitoring GM consumption patterns, Canada must start investing in the development of baseline data to determine "general consumption" patterns and trends.

The publishing of GM sales and usage data was identified as a lower priority. In order to be practical, data should be disaggregated. One of the difficulties with this option involves the competitive nature of the information. Sales and usage data could be considered to be proprietary. Deriving estimates from mathematical modelling was determined to be a relatively "crude" method of estimation.

On-going reassessments are required in order to build flexibility and adaptability into the regulatory process.

The underlying values which could assist in developing policy in this area are as follows:

- Transparency – share/integrate information.
- Leadership – think strategically. Strive to be an example of environmental stewardship for all countries.
- Prevention – assist in the development of feasibility options to prevent adverse impacts.
- Credibility and responsibility – credible scientific studies allow for responsible decisions to be made.
- Knowledge – baseline information leads to strategic decision making.

Theme D Regulatory System

Separation and independence of regulatory functions

The current separation of promoter and regulator functions between the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and Agriculture Canada is adequate. However, the public may not always be completely at ease with the separation. This relative uneasiness may become especially true as future regulatory activities regarding GM food increase in number and complexity. As a result, there is a need to increase transparency to clearly illustrate how the roles and processes are separate.

Capability and capacity in the regulatory system

Scientific resources and expertise in the regulatory system need to be increased. Regulators should draw on outside expertise to better deal with exceptional cases, rather than on a routine basis, and to ensure the regulatory regime is kept current and peer assessed for accuracy and balance. There is also a need for scientists with more of a "generalist" background to properly position/evaluate scientific assessments in the broader context.

Ensuring safety during research and development activities

Strengthen existing guidelines by developing and promulgating Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for all aspects of research related to GM organisms. In addition, existing guidelines (both voluntary and mandatory) should be rolled out and used as educational documents for scientists and researchers. Collect and summarize all current mandatory and voluntary processes in order to publicly exhibit accountability within the industry, and ensure that accountability to these processes is transparent and demonstrated.

The underlying values which could assist in developing policy in this area are as follows:

- Accountability – the parties to GM regulation must be accountable to the processes.
- Separation of promoter and regulator – demonstrate and communicate evidence that regulatory process and policy is sufficiently independent of the government promotion policy and activities.
- Transparency – regulatory processes and results should be accessible to the public.
- Quality and authenticity of GMO information – information about GM foods should be of high quality and should authenticate/confirm the GM aspects and impacts in a consistent fashion.

Theme E Social and Ethical Considerations

Group A

Challenges

- Considering societal values and principles.
- Determining social impacts.
- Ensuring the sustainable development of society.
- Eliminating the word "ethical" because it does not discriminate between individual and societal ethics; and substitute for "values and principles".

Potential Ways Ahead

- Add a risk-benefit approach to current scientific evaluations and risk assessment process.

Group B

Challenges

- Communities should be able to opt in or out of GM crop production locally.
- People need to know what they are eating.
- How do you assign scarce government resources – amount of public debate or importance of issues?

Potential Ways Ahead

- Address social and ethical concerns using cost benefit analysis.
- Adding broader social and ethical considerations would allow this technology to be used to its greatest benefit and the public would be more comfortable being in on consultations.
- Need to address the broader questions of social change affecting society and biotechnology and not just focus on GM foods (e.g., multinational influences, impacts and adoption of technology, and using this to determine Canadian direction on major sectors like biotechnology).

Group C

Challenges

- Add a risk benefit approach in addition to current scientific evaluations and risk assessment process.
- Increasing dialogue and addressing value judgements.
- Dealing with the perception that those that criticize are "trouble makers"

- Manoeuvring in the current environment of distrust.
- Increasing understanding of multiple perspectives
- Harmonizing the safety/scientific assessment approach
- Ignoring emotional/religious issues because they are difficult to deal with exacerbates the problem and fuels and "emotional" debate and provides "partial" answers to a complex issue.
- "Teasing out" the social/ethical issues versus the scientific/safety issues.
- Legitimising emotions/feelings.

Potential Ways Ahead

- Revamp the regulatory process to include a process wherein the social/ethical issues may be addressed. This requires new expertise and adequate resourcing.
- Set guidelines as opposed to changing the legislative framework.
- Build on the social/ethical considerations that are currently used within the framework of trade negotiation and the scientific assessment process.

Group D

Challenges

- Social/ethical aspects should be incorporated at a high level.
- Social/ethical considerations should not be product based.
- The risk assessment could be expanded to incorporate a benefits analysis that would help balance the questions of risk in the social and ethical context.
- Health and safety are paramount and should be core aspects to be covered first. If they are satisfactorily addressed, then social and ethical questions will be easier to address.
- In that respect, the principal of "substantial equivalence" is not sufficient to achieve confidence on health and safety.

Potential way ahead

- Focus on the broad directions of biotech/GMF (e.g., define broad objectives for Canola and use it to shape directional decisions).
- Identify types of products we will pursue and those we won't under any circumstances.
- Consider the attributes of "good and ethical producers" and use these to educate and shape policy.

- Add “benefits” to the risk assessment.
- The process to develop direction should be expanded.
- CBAC is a good vehicle to conduct or enable this larger dialogue on social and ethical considerations.

Summary of key values

Participants discussed values and principles related to governance and the regulatory system. The following were raised and most widely supported:

For shaping the regulatory system

Top five:

- Accountability and transparency
- Quality and authenticity of information
- Education
- Caution
- Justice

Other values discussed in groups and supported by some, but not selected as most important include:

- Integrity
- Separation of promoter and regulator
- Informed public
- Market success

For shaping policy choices

Top five:

- Food environment safety
- Leadership
- Justice
- Caution
- Environment report

Other values discussed in groups and supported by some, but not selected as most important include:

- Precaution principle
- Looking ahead
- Prevention

Closing ideas and guidance to CBAC

This section outlines the final three or four suggestions made by small groups of participants as closing remarks for future consideration by CBAC. These suggestions should not be considered to be consensus views of any of the groups.

General

- Develop a strong vision around the Canadian food supply with an emphasis on health and economic aspects of food. The current and future approach to GM foods would fit within this vision.
- The key issue is transgenic applications from animal to plant.
- CBAC needs to get very creative to break public perception that they are biased in favour of GM foods.
- Place discussion of GM foods within the larger vision of the Canadian food supply in relation to our health and economic potential.
- Ensure information related to GM foods is available to the public.
- Actively seek and engage the Canadian public.
- Unbiased informed information based on scientific evidence.
- Address the social and ethical issues at a higher level.
- Publicize existing regulatory policy governing GM foods.
- Create educational programs.
- Increase resources to build relations with the public.
- Create a program for international certification of domestic regulatory systems.

From Consultation perspective

- CBC town hall format meeting should be used to better gauge public opinion.
- Need to better define the purpose and the desired outcomes of these consultations.
- Open line radio, more round table consultations.
- Ensure that you include anybody who wishes to be involved in the consultation process.

Please note that similar reports from each of the five CBAC stakeholder workshops on The Regulation of GM Foods, conducted across Canada from April 2nd to April 10th 2001, will be posted on the CBAC web site. As well, results from all five workshops will be integrated into a single roll-up report that will also be available on the CBAC web site by the end of the month.

Please visit the CBAC web site at www.cbac-cccb.ca or call the CBAC toll-free number at 1-866-748-2222 for additional information or documentation related to this or other CBAC projects.