

**Minister for the Environment
Hon Marian Hobbs**

ROYAL COMMISSION INTO GM

Questions and Answers

Q: Is 12 months long enough to consider the issue?

A: Genetic modification research and development is a rapidly moving area. A 12-month period for the Royal Commission gives enough time for the public to have meaningful input into the inquiry and for the Commission to provide a prompt response to the Government on genetic modification issues. If the Royal Commission continues for longer than this, it may be overtaken by new developments in the technology.

Q: Why have you opted for a voluntary moratorium - why not just legislate?

A: We believe the science and industry sectors are keen to act responsibly on this matter. A voluntary moratorium means that their concerns, as well as the concerns of the public are being considered. If those involved in the work agree to a moratorium then this gives the best possible chance of it being adhered to. To legislate could take longer and thus delay the Royal Commission. And if the bill went to a select committee then the arguments that should be presented to the Royal Commission would go before the select committee

Q: How long do you expect the negotiations on the moratorium to take?

A: We need to take the appropriate amount of time to discuss these with the parties that will be affected and reach agreement with them on the best way to move forward on this. I am expecting that with goodwill from the scientific community this can be done quickly. Officials are to report progress within three months, by mid-July at the very latest, hopefully by early June, when the RC begins its work but not its public hearings.

Q: Is the Government, through this moratorium, putting a stop to all genetic modification work? How does this fit with the Government's stated support for the knowledge society?

A: No. The Government is stopping all GE research which poses risks to the public and to the environment.

Q: What field tests will still go ahead?

A: No field tests involving heritable (reproductive) materials will go ahead. Any field test that is already approved under the HSNO Act will be able to continue provided the strict controls placed on it are adhered to. The Government will be stepping up inspection of these field tests to make sure that the conditions imposed are complied with.

A new application for a field test will proceed only if it meets the exemption criteria, i.e. if it was for medical purposes, or if the test provided very substantial benefits to New Zealand. These would include economic, health and environmental benefits. An example of a field test with a potential environmental benefit could include developing biological controls for possums or other serious pests to New Zealand.

There will be strict controls on any field test so that all heritable materials are removed and any organisms involved are securely contained and properly disposed of at the end of the test.

Q: What field tests will be stopped?

A: The proposed moratorium is designed to preserve New Zealand's choices about the use of genetic modification technology pending the outcome of the Royal Commission. Signatories to the voluntary moratorium would not be able to proceed with field tests that provide only limited benefit to New Zealand. This would include tests that grow seed only for overseas use. Field tests would not be allowed if they posed a risk of release of reproductive materials.

Q: Will the moratorium apply to existing field tests?

A: No, field tests already approved and with appropriate controls imposed on them will continue. The Government will be stepping up inspection of these field tests to make sure that the conditions imposed are complied with.

Q: The moratorium is too restrictive.

A: The moratorium will limit some field tests. These are the tests that are of no particular benefit to New Zealand science. In addition the Government is seeking a greater level of assurance about the containment measures established for those tests that are occurring or likely to start during the Royal Commission inquiry period.

We are not interfering with the HSNO evaluation process for applications for field tests. What we are doing is asking some researchers to delay some aspects of research until the Royal Commission has given its advice on the future use of genetic modification in New Zealand.

Q: Why a Commission of 4 rather than 5 members?

A: The size of the Commission is not a numbers game. We have selected four highly skilled individuals that have complementary areas of expertise to consider the issues in front of the Royal Commission. Having more members for the sake of it would be an expensive waste of taxpayers' money.

Q: There are not enough scientists on the Commission.

A: The science and medical community are well represented on the Commission. The members are there to hear and consider the evidence – not research the issues. I have no doubt that the interested parties will bring all the necessary information in front of the Commission. In addition the Royal Commission will have a highly skilled secretariat to service the inquiry throughout the 12-month period, and it can seek expert advice on any subject.

Q: What have other countries done about these issues? How can we be sure that the risks that have been identified overseas won't apply to here?

A: We are keeping in touch with international developments. The situation here is not the same as it is elsewhere so a lot of the information coming in from overseas is not applicable.

Q: How can we be sure that the system put in place to manage the risks will work, that nothing will go wrong?

A: I am confident that the controls imposed by the ERMA and the extra monitoring we are putting in place are as strict as possible.

Q: What progress has been made on genetically modified food labelling?

A: Australian and New Zealand Health Ministers have made a decision in principle to label all genetically modified foods. The details of the amended standard are being worked through and we expect a final decision on the shape of the labelling requirements to be made midyear.

Q: What does the Royal Commission mean in terms of the Biosafety Protocol?

A: The protocol will be open for signature next month but is unlikely to come into effect for some years because there is a need for a minimum number of countries to ratify it. Under the usual New Zealand constitutional practice, ratification does not occur until the domestic legislative framework is brought into line with the obligations contained in the protocol. Prior to ratification, the protocol will be tabled in Parliament in line with our treaty making practice.