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While the federal Office of the Gene Technology Regulator has approved the commercial planting of genetically modified canola varieties, and Food Standards Australia New Zealand has approved GM canola's use in food, most states and territories have declared moratoria that prevent the commercial planting of these varieties.

While the moratoria in most states and territories do not expire until 2008, the ACT's moratorium expires later this year. The ACT may not have canola fields but it is home to a powerful biotech research sector that is pressuring the ACT government to overturn the ban and recast the nation's agricultural landscape (see pp.14–15).

The ACT can afford to follow the lead of its federal counterpart and grant the wishes of its electorate without incurring the wrath of farmers who would prefer to produce conventional or organic crops without fear of GM "contamination". The ACT's Chief Minister, John Stanhope, has noted as much, telling the local branch of industry body Ausbiotech: "We in the ACT are in the somewhat luxurious position of having our long-life, stay-fresh, vitamin-enhanced cake and eating it too" as "we don't have canola fields" which "behoves us to approach the expiry of the ACT's moratorium with an open mind".

The real concern for the anti-GM lobby lies in the weakening of the state-based moratoria in canola-friendly climates (Queensland and the Northern Territory are unsuitable for canola and do not have moratoria). If one domino falls, will the consensus between the other states with moratoria fall over too?

The moratoria were set in place after a concerted scare campaign by organisations such as Greenpeace and GeneEthics influenced public opinion against GM foods while scientific organisations like CSIRO sat on their hands. While CSIRO scientists may have been restricted in commenting on policy, a new opportunity may have arisen to circumvent this.

Australia's new Chief Scientist, Dr Jim Peacock, is an ardent advocate of gene technology, having been Chief of CSIRO Plant Industry for 25 years. *Australasian Science* reveals this month (pp.32–33) that Peacock also has an important new role at CSIRO within the office of Chief Executive Dr Geoff Garrett, who has had difficulty speaking with authority on CSIRO's science – only on organisational change.

Peacock is thus positioned to both articulate CSIRO's science and then put on his Chief Scientist's hat and recommend policy – a no-go zone for all other CSIRO scientists. His pet topic of biotechnology is likely to be prominent.

Peacock sat next to Stanhope at the Ausbiotech dinner. It's likely he had a quiet word in Stanhope's ear – and will have the ear of many more politicians by 2008.

COVER STORY

The ACT's moratorium on GM food crops expires later this year. Industry pressure to remove the ban will set a political precedent for other states and territories with moratoria in place (see pp.14–15).



Image: Jamie Turfrey