MEDIA RELEASE

*** Embargo: 2.15am Friday 15 May 2009 ***

Australian growers support collaborative GM wheat approach

Australian grain grower organisations today joined United States and Canadian colleagues in endorsing a statement to support biotechnology and GM wheat research and development, and coordination and stakeholder dialogue regarding market and trade considerations.

The trilateral statement, signed by key Australian, United States and Canadian grower organisations including the North American Millers' Association, recognises the important role biotechnology plays in delivering future food security.

"Basic agronomic improvements to wheat like strengthening disease and insect resistance, enhancing wheat's use of soil nutrients and water, increasing tolerance to weather extremes like drought and frost, are all possible with biotechnology. Another critical area for biotechnology is to improve the nutritional aspects of wheat to facilitate healthier living for people all over the world. Biotechnology is not the only answer to these questions, but it will be a significant component to solutions," the statement says.

The statement recognises the role biotechnology, and gene technology, have played in world agriculture. "Biotechnology is a proven technique to deploy traits of interest with a high degree of precision in agriculture crops. Crops derived through biotechnology are subjected to strict regulatory scrutiny before commercialisation. Over 10 years of global experience with biotechnology has demonstrated a convincing record of safety and environmental benefits as well as quality and productivity gains."

The Australian organisations endorsing the trilateral statement - Grains Council of Australia, Grain Growers Association and Pastoralists and Graziers Association of WA - encouraged industry to work together and look beyond the current GM debate to new opportunities to support Australian R&D efforts and deliver new crop varieties that underpin the sustainability and profitability of the Australian grains industry.

Australia, like many other countries, has grown GM cotton since 1996 when GM varieties were first introduced. In 2008, 12 years after the rest of the world, 108 growers in New South Wales and Victoria grew GM canola for the first time. It is anticipated that the GM canola uptake in these two States will be much greater this year.

Field trials of GM bananas, barley, canola, cotton, sugarcane, perennial ryegrass, tall fescue, wheat and white clover are taking place in Australia. These trials are designed to examine the agronomic

performance of the plants, under the regulation of the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator, with commercialisation not expected for some time.

The Australian grains industry worked together to address the market and trade considerations around GM canola and grower organisations welcome the opportunity to work with Australian and global collaborators and stakeholders to discuss and prepare for GM wheat, with considerable lead time available before any GM wheat receives final regulatory approvals and is commercialised.

- Ends -

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BACKGROUND BRIEFING NOTE

Gene technology and the wheat industry

The role of gene technology
GM traits have been successfully used in a number of major crops, including corn, soybean, cotton, canola and sugar beet among others; this success and the range of potential benefits of having more favourable traits in a global food staple is driving the acceleration of R&D into GM wheat.

- The Australian grains industry supports the introduction of approved GM crops in a manner that meets regulatory, market and customer requirements; utilises the industry's stewardship principles; and delivers choice to stakeholders along the supply chain.
- A significant global R&D effort is now being applied to develop GM wheat varieties with favourable production, environment and customer demand traits; Australian scientists are playing a key role in this work.
- The Australian grains industry will also work with global stakeholders, including the USA and Canada, in the development and adoption of GM technology.

GM wheat statement
A range of key wheat producer organisations in Canada, the USA and Australia have signed a joint statement regarding research and development and market and trade considerations for gene technology in wheat.

- This statement expresses support for more efficient, sustainable and profitable production of wheat around the world through being able to access approved GM wheat varieties.
- The signatories will work toward the synchronised and coordinated commercialisation of GM traits to address market and trade considerations and ensure a clear path to market for R&D outcomes. They are also committed to working with other stakeholders to address their needs and concerns.
- The following organisations have endorsed the statement:
    - US Wheat Associates
    - National Association of Wheat Growers (USA)
    - North American Millers' Association
    - Grain Growers of Canada
    - Western Canadian Wheat Growers Association
    - Alberta Winter Wheat Producers
    - Grains Council of Australia
    - Grain Growers Association
    - Pastoralists & Graziers Association

Australian GM wheat research and development
The Australian grains industry supports and invests in a range of plant breeding projects and methods, including gene technology, to deliver ongoing increases in industry productivity and environmental sustainability.

- As in all other significant agricultural producing nations, both public and private organisations are investing in gene technology R&D in Australia to provide public good outcomes.
- A number of Australian researchers are using gene technology in their wheat breeding programs to develop varieties with more favourable production, environmental and consumer demand traits.

- This includes wheat varieties with altered starch composition, drought tolerance, enhanced tolerance to environmental stresses and wheat with enhanced dietary fibre.
- Although these projects are still very much in a research phase, a number of GM wheat field trials are either underway or planned for Australia.
- It is anticipated that the outcomes of Australian R&D would not near commercialisation for at least seven years.

Stewardship and regulation

Stewardship is central to the day-to-day operations of the Australian grains industry and underpinned the successful adoption of GM canola, and will do so for other GM varieties when they are approved for commercialisation in the future.

- In practice, industry stewardship means operating with transparency and accountability to world class protocols and standards which allow the Australian grains industry to meet market, customer and regulatory requirements at every point in the supply chain.
- All gene technology research in Australia is regulated by the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator (OGTR) which assesses GM crops in two key areas - environmental safety and human health and safety.
- Australia's gene technology regulatory framework is considered one of the most stringent and rigorous in the world.

Market and trade considerations

In supporting the commercialisation of GM canola the Australian grains industry recognised in its 2007 statement "Delivering Market Choice with GM canola" that it must deliver market choice through the combination of existing commercially accepted protocols, processes and practices.

- For a new GM variety or crop, the industry recognises that key market choice criteria must be assessed and met, and will work with stakeholders to address these.
- The industry also appreciates that there might be non-science and trade related sensitivities around GM wheat and that these need to be considered prior to the commercialisation of any GM wheat.

Gene technology - benefits

GM crop technology is finding increasing favour around the world every year. The ISAAA (International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications) stated in its annual GM crop statistics, that:

- in 2008, 13.3 million farmers worldwide grew 125 million hectares of GM crops in 25 countries, including a number of European Union countries
- this is an increase of 9.4 per cent over the previous year
- three countries planted GM crops for the first time – Bolivia, Burkina Faso and Egypt
- Gene technology is an important tool for plant breeders, farmers and communities. It can be used to develop plants with inherent high levels of pest and disease resistance, increased tolerance to weather extremes such as drought and frost, and improved health benefits such as modified starches, oil content and vitamin sources to combat diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and vitamin deficiencies.
- GM crops also have an important role to play in producing food more sustainably and contributing to overcoming the world's food security challenges.