

New Zealand GM inquiry will cast a wide net

Sydney

New Zealand's new Labour-led coalition government has set up a royal commission into the implications of modifying genes. The commission's main purpose is to reconcile a bitter debate within the country over GM crops, but it is also expected to have international implications.

The government has imposed a 'voluntary moratorium' on applications to release and field-test genetically modified organisms (GMOs) until the commission reports, and a total ban on releases "involving reproductive material".

The status of the inquiry is believed to give the four-member panel an independence and power to call and cross-examine witnesses not enjoyed by inquiries into transgenic organisms in other countries.

Sir Thomas Eichelbaum, who retired as the country's Chief Justice last May, will chair the commission. He expects the proceedings to be a mix of testimony given under oath — with legal representation — and less formal discussion. "Our conclusions will never be the definitive word," he says.

Although its remit is to report on strategic options and to recommend changes to legislative, regulatory, policy or institutional

arrangements in New Zealand — whose economy is dependent on agriculture — the inquiry will be international in scope.

Opponents of genetic engineering are preparing to press their case at the inquiry. Doug Parr, Greenpeace's chief scientific adviser in Britain, says that his organization is willing to participate. "No country has the monopoly of expertise in this issue," he says. Multinational biotechnology companies are also expected to take part.

"All sides are welcome and we are providing resources from a budget of NZ\$4.8 million (US\$2.5 million) to enable submissions from overseas, in person or by video link," says Marian Hobbs, New Zealand's environment minister. She believes that the style of the inquiry will "help to dispel distrust by sharing one vocabulary".

Hobbs announced the inquiry in a week when two breaches of the regulations on GMOs were revealed. One was by a laboratory at the University of Otago's Medical School in Christchurch, where researchers allegedly extracted tissue from the lizard-like tuatara and were constructing a DNA library, without full permission from the regulatory authority or local Maori people, for whom the animal has spiritual significance.



Eichelbaum: accepts that his commission's conclusions "will never be the definitive word".

The chair of the university's biological safety committee, George Petersen (who is also acting president of the Royal Society of New Zealand) himself raised the alarm, declaring "sadness for the whole scientific community". But Petersen believes that "by publicly confessing before the regulators or the media uncovered it, we earned good points for owning up".

The commission's other members are Jean Fleming, a researcher at the University

of Otago in molecular reproduction and endocrinology; Richard Randerson, an Anglican priest with a strong record in social issues; and Jacqueline Allan, a medical practitioner of Maori descent.

The opposition National Party has attacked the lack of any panel members with industrial experience. But Hobbs rejects this, saying that “the production community will be welcome to contribute”.

University scientists appear reconciled to the ban on GMO release, as they have escaped the restrictions on laboratory work sought by the Green Party. Researchers can still argue for exemptions for non-commercial work, such as the control of possums. But Greenpeace and other activists have described the moratorium as contradictory and voiced concerns over “the risk of irreversibility”.

The Crown Research Institutes, set up by the previous government and funded through contract work from both the public and private sector, have angered conservationists by pressing for expanded field trials. But science minister Pete Hodgson has told the institutes to toe the government’s line.

Spokesman and head of HortResearch, Ian Warrington, says that the restrictions “will cause the termination of some research”. Michael Dunbier, chief of the Crop and Food Research Institute, says the ban could cause scientists to leave New Zealand. **Peter Pockley**

German research agency ‘doesn’t stifle creativity’, say 1,600 scientists

Munich

More than 1,600 German scientists have rallied to the defence of the country’s main grant-giving agency for basic research, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). Their action is a response to allegations that the agency is reluctant to fund research outside the scientific mainstream.

In today’s *Nature* (see page 922), the scientists defend the DFG against criticism from parts of Germany’s scientific community recently reported in German newspapers (see *Nature* 404, 217; 2000).

The complaints, they argue, are unrepresentative and largely unjustified, given the DFG’s generally “unbiased support for creative, high-quality research and its programmes for young scientists”.

The letter was drafted by Reinhard Jahn and Herbert Jäckle, directors at the Max Planck Institute for Biophysical Chemistry in Göttingen. It was mailed to a number of randomly chosen scientists, with a request to sign it and forward it to colleagues.

The initiative was well received — albeit mainly by senior scientists. Only about a

quarter of the 1,600-odd signatories are young scientists such as PhD students or postdoctoral researchers. Most are institute heads or other well-established researchers.

But Jahn, 48, an experienced DFG referee and a winner of the agency’s DM3 million (US\$1.4 million) Leibniz prize for his research on biological membranes, says that “the time has come for the whole community to positively affirm the DFG and to protect it against damage”.

Jahn says he decided to initiate the chain letter after reading last month’s *Nature* article. “Such negative reports about the DFG are grist to the mill of those who would like to increase political influence on our self-governing agency,” he says.

Jahn returned to Germany in 1997 after six years at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute in Yale. He challenges the claim that the DFG is less efficient than US or UK funding agencies. “Compared, for example, with the procedures of the European Commission, the DFG is certainly capable of funding the best research in a highly efficient manner,” he says. **Quirin Schiermeier**