

Don't hobble our smart food

[Economics & Deregulation](#), [Food & Environment](#) and [Deregulation Unit](#) | [Alan Moran](#)



Herald Sun 4th August, 1999

Over the weekend, tv news showed footage of British consumer activists, clad in white, raiding a farm, bobbies in pursuit, to destroy a genetically modified crop. That particular stunt backfired: the people-in-white destroyed the wrong crop.

Genetically modified food is taking over from the 'green revolution' based on hybrid plant varieties, that got underway in the 1960s. Genetic modification modifies plants' DNA so that they need less water, less fertiliser or less pesticide. Like the technology of the 'green revolution', genetic modification has a vast potential. The reduced costs it brings mean that it will be incorporated in virtually all major crops---already it dominates the North American soy and maize plantings.

Today, Commonwealth/State Health ministers are addressing the issue of labelling foods that incorporate genetically modified ingredients. Decisions at that ANZFSC meeting have the capacity to put Australia on a road to increased, unnecessary and costly regulation. The outcome could be a cost to Australian consumers similar to that of a GST on food and a loss of export competitiveness and income for Australian farmers.

These costs emerge if comprehensive labelling is required of any food containing an ingredient derived from genetically modified plants. The costs arise, not from the label itself, but the vast new auditing and duplication of handling required to ensure the label is accurate. Some estimates in the UK have put this at a 50 per cent increase in the basic food. Such a cost impost would halt the productivity gains from genetically modified improved food.

Comprehensive labelling of all food that might contain genetically modified ingredients is an objective of the Australian Consumers' Association. wants, even if the food is no different. If carried through, this will require the entire food chain to be streamed into products that contain and products that do not contain genetically modified ingredients.

This segregation is known as Identity Preservation. Rigorous streaming would call for considerable duplication of processing equipment, a comprehensive auditing process and a large new bureaucracy. It is estimated to increase the costs of basic food raw materials by up to 50 per cent. is made a requirement d , as the Australian Consumers' Association and its activists allies.

[Back to news page](#)



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[2014](#)

- > [August](#)
- > [July](#)
- > [June](#)
- > [May](#)
- > [April](#)
- > [March](#)

- > [February](#)
- > [January](#)

[2013](#)

- > [December](#)
- > [November](#)
- > [October](#)
- > [September](#)
- > [August](#)
- > [July](#)
- > [June](#)
- > [May](#)
- > [April](#)
- > [March](#)
- > [February](#)
- > [January](#)

[2012](#)

- > [December](#)
- > [November](#)
- > [October](#)
- > [September](#)
- > [August](#)
- > [July](#)
- > [June](#)
- > [May](#)
- > [April](#)
- > [March](#)
- > [February](#)
- > [January](#)

[2011](#)

[2010](#)

[2009](#)

[2008](#)

[2007](#)

[2006](#)

[2005](#)

[2004](#)

[2003](#)

[2002](#)

[2001](#)

[2000](#)

[1999](#)

[1998](#)

[1997](#)

[1996](#)

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