Professor Peter Newman
Director, Sustainability Policy Unit
Policy Office
Department of the Premier and Cabinet

RE: PERSONAL SUBMISSION COMMENTS TO CONSULTATION PAPER FOR THE STATE SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY FOR WESTERN AUSTRALIA.

Dear Mr Newman,

After reading the consultation paper I would like to commend your office and the Government for this opportunity to submit input in this important area.

As I have a farming background and am involved in the National Association of Sustainable Agriculture (NASAA) WA committee, most of my comments are in relation to sustainable farming in this state.

Comments to key questions in Box 1:

Sustainability is most definitely a worthwhile pursuit, and many benefits to human health, social wellbeing, the environment, and the economy could flow if this was taken more seriously.

I believe government can play a bigger role in facilitating change to be more sustainable by increased funding and research into biological/organic agriculture. Many countries such as Germany, UK and Croatia are already subsidising organic agriculture and refusing GM crops and products.

Our state government deserves praise for promoting organic agriculture at the Centre for new Industries Development, where Steven McCoy is employed. However, I believe this is totally at odds with the Biotechnology research area of the Department of Agriculture, for a number of reasons including:

- Consumers are NOT demanding genetically modified food, and the golden rule that all markets are led by consumer demand needs to be remembered;
- Some of the world's most imminent scientists have commented on the dangers of genetically modified food. (See website: www.natural-law.ca/genetic/ScientistsonDangers.html)
- Insurance companies will not insure GM crops – Allan Mason, CEO of Insurance Council of Australia commented on ABC radio's The World Today, 21/06/2000 that there is no past track record to assess the level of risk and an appropriate premium cannot be calculated. Claims may take many years to manifest, just as asbestos claims have done.
- Other reasons, in particular genetic pollution, outlined in a letter to a rural newspaper regarding the Department of Agriculture 'GM-Free Zones' discussion paper, which I'll not repeat here but will attach a copy with this document.

The Federal Government has sadly been backing GM research to the hilt, to the tune of $250 million per annum, compared to the organic industry (which has a market increasing in demand) receiving less than $300,000 pa for research, development and marketing. (Source: GeneEthics Network, Australian Conservation Foundation

Habitat supplement Dec 2000) It is ridiculous that this situation is so out of balance, considering the organic farming sector is one of the fastest growing in the economy.

It is also totally unacceptable that some government agencies are accepting funding from Multi-National Corporations with vested interests in genetically engineered food crops. With many scientists supporting GM technology it is no longer from an unbiased, purely scientific viewpoint.

At a state level, I believe funding must be increased for the organic sector, which is truly sustainable and proven worldwide, and dramatically cut in the Biotechnology sector, for all the reasons mentioned above.

The government can encourage sustainable farming practises through providing subsidies for farmers in the following areas:

- Full soil analysis including all trace minerals by an INDEPENDENT laboratory (not a fertilizer company), say, every three years. Farmers can then work on correcting the deficiencies that are common in our depleted Western Australian soils;
- Similarly, occasional soil samples tested for microbial biomass, which influences crop yield, as is carried out by soil scientists at Centre for Land Rehabilitation at UWA;
- Use of alternatives to chemically-produced phosphate fertilizers, which end up in our waterways through run-off. Sustained release mineral fertilizers and compost-based preparations are better alternatives.
- Continued funding for on-ground actions in catchment groups, as is provided by the Natural Heritage Trust.

Examples of demonstrating sustainable practises that I am aware of include:

1. Deep ripping, or deep tillage, which is gaining a resurgence among broadacre farmers due to consistently showing better crop and pasture growth, normally inhibited by soil compaction. AGRDC-funded research project at Merredin has shown that deep tillage with an "amelioration package" comprising gypsum and nutrients achieved significant crop yields. Retention (rather than burning) of stubble, where plant residues are returned to the soil after harvest, in combination with natural products that encourage bacteria to multiply, break down the stubble and return nutrients.
2. An Agriculture Department publication entitled 'The Use of Native Perennial Grasses on farms in the Wheatbelt of Western Australia', by Roy Butler of the Dryland Research Institute at Merredin. This discussion paper is to raise awareness of and interest in native perennial grasses. Benefits include maintaining or improving biodiversity and ecological integrity of regions, increasing habitats for indigenous flora and fauna, pastures surviving extended periods of drought, higher water use in summer and autumn, less soil erosion, reduced inputs of nitrogen and phosphorous and extra grazing for livestock as many native grasses are nutritious, palatable fodder. Also mentioned is "The dominance of perennial native pastures over annual grasses and broadleaf weeds could ultimately allow the production of winter cereal crops without the need for cultivation or herbicide application."

Other examples of demonstrating sustainable practises are being provided by groups such as the Saltland Pastures Association, Greening Australia (including West Australia Native Grass Society), the Land Management Society, Murdoch University's Environmental Technology Centre and even the Perth Zoo's Harmony Farm, on a small scale.

I believe more research and development into points 1 and 2 above would go some way towards ensuring sustainable outcomes could be achieved.

Another R & D project worth mentioning here, although on a national level, is that efforts are being made to establish an Organic Cooperative Research Centre (CRC). A Bid Management Team is drawing together support and potential partners in an initiative designed to lift organics into the mainstream of agricultural research and development in Australia, including leading research universities, Federal and State research centres and industry associations joining with the organic and food industries to mount the bid for Commonwealth Government recognition and financial support for a CRC. (Reported on front page of Acres Australia, The national newspaper of sustainable agriculture, March 2002.)

I would like to urge the WA Government to support this CRC wherever possible.

In conclusion I hope these ideas and comments are useful, and appreciate the opportunity to have a say.

Yours sincerely,

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GM-FREE ZONES NOT WORKABLE

I wish to comment on the 'GM-Free zones' discussion paper released by the Department of Agriculture.

After reading this discussion paper I have some major concerns. How naïve to think that designating certain zones within our state for "GM crops, non-GM crops, or both" will work successfully! Nowhere else in the world has this been able to be done.

It is common knowledge that bees, wind and other pollinators can move pollen for many kilometres. It seems ridiculous that crop separation distances of as little as 10m and 200m are being stated in this paper.

Here are some warning signals:

GM crops have already been discovered outside their designated area through pollination or carelessness, and this is only at trial stage. In South Australia canola plants were found growing at a tip site, and a University here in WA has been under investigation by the Gene Technology Regulator for plants found growing at a test site one and two years after the trial was completed.

The 'Starlink' corn case in the US caused food and agricultural authorities around the world to rethink the introduction of GM food. Aventis Cropscience's GM variety Starlink became mixed with non-GM corn, forcing a food recall costing between $600 million and $2 billion. Class actions were launched by people who claimed to have allergic reactions, as Starlink had only been approved for animal feed and industrial uses by the US EPA.

Last year Canadian farmer Percy Schmeiser lost a legal battle after Roundup Ready canola from a neighbour's farm infected his crops in 1997. His 'crime' was using his own seed for the next year's crop as he traditionally did. The court decision prohibited the farmer from using his own seed again, and ordered him to pay Monsanto about $10,000 for its user fees and up to $75,000 in profits from his 1998 crop. (The West Australian, April 2, 2001) What a setback for farmers – to be held liable if pollen from neighbours transmit patented genes to their crops without their knowledge or consent. A dangerous game, indeed.

Page seven of the discussion paper states "A GM-Free Zone could … serve as a reference area for assessing the impacts of gene technology on the environment, public health or trade." Surely this means intention to conduct an experiment. (No prizes for guessing who the guinea pigs are.)

I thought it was a fundamental right for a farmer to grow the product of their choice on their own land. The future generations of farmers won't appreciate being told what they can or cannot grow.

It is interesting to note that the horticultural industry has wisely steered clear of GMOs. This shows that they are more in touch with consumers, who are simply not demanding this food.

Farmers and environmentalists ought to be united on this issue, as it is not only about environment and health, but the rights and livelihoods of farmers.

Politicians must heed the warnings and consider the legal ramifications - even to themselves – if they fail to obey the precautionary principle.

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