Speech by

LINDY NELSON-CARR

MEMBER FOR MUNDINGBURRA

Hansard 24 August 1999

GENETICALLY MODIFIED FOODS

Ms NELSON-CARR (Mundingburra—ALP) (7.05 p.m.): I rise tonight to speak about the global move towards genetically modified foods. I acknowledge at the outset that I do not speak against biotechnology—to the contrary—but I do acknowledge that Australia is joining the burgeoning gene technology industry to fast-track engineered foods. Indeed, if we are to believe the General Manager of Woolworths Queensland, Bernie Brookes, we are looking at a future in which 60% of supermarket food contains genetically modified ingredients. Not only that, but we have been eating engineered food for many years—food that is untested, unassessed and unlabelled.

How do we know which foods have been altered? We do not. So what is gene technology and how safe is it? ANZFA, the food authority, defines it this way—

> "Food produced using gene technology is a food which has been derived from an organism which has been modified by gene technology, but does not include any substance regulated as a food additive or a processing aid."

There are many foods that come under this definition. Some are living organisms and can reproduce, but most foods produced using gene technology are not living organisms and cannot reproduce. They are simply ingredients which have been derived from a genetically modified organism and used in processed food such as oil or flour. Some goods may include one or more ingredients produced using gene technology. Some goods produced using gene technology contain new genetic material or a new protein derived from new DNA.

It sounds scientific and safe enough, but if genetically engineered foods are being sold without labelling or testing, do we as consumers not have a right to know? If genetically engineered whole foods—for example, potatoes, tomatoes and soy—are used as ingredients in processed foods and are present in a number of mass consumed food products, such as soy-based baby formulas and maybe some popular corn chip brands, then I as a mother of many children can see that if we fail to provide labelling then my children and millions of others, plus adults, will be consuming genetically engineered products each day without knowledge.

Is this alarmist drivel or is this about us and the food we eat versus the scientists and chemical companies—the same organisations which seem to push the line that we do not have a right to know whether we consume genetically engineered food, and certainly at the moment we do not have a say in the process. What we are told is that genetically modified foods will be cheaper and more nutritious.

The agricultural giant that leads the world in developing genetically modified crops, Monsanto, has established the herbicide resistant soybeans that are potentially present but unlabelled in 60% of processed foods on Australian supermarket shelves. Surely people's health should be protected by assessing the safety of genetically modified products. Would this not include labelling all genetically modified foods? We are told that such a process would be unenforceable, unsophisticated, time consuming and costly. I believe that our Ministers are working to change this misconception.

The most pressing health concern is the insertion of novel genes into fruits, vegetables and other food products. This insertion creates the possibility that a non-toxic element in the food could become toxic and endanger human health. Food allergies are another major health concern. Those with food allergies will have no way of knowing what goods to avoid. Some health professionals are also concerned that the mass consumption of genetically engineered foods could make treating infections more difficult because some genetically modified foods could contain antibiotic resistant genes.

What sort of longitudinal safety trials have allayed these concerns? I fear none. Is this not all about choice? Any genetically modified food should be labelled so that consumers have the choice of whether or not they want to enjoy this new technology. The argument against consumer choice is that if a genetically modified tomato or soybean has lost none of its normal nutritional value and gained nothing toxic or allergenic in the process—that is, it is substantially equivalent to the garden variety—then a label is not required. This is the stuff of international trade—not just domestic policy. I ask: who stands to gain most in genetic engineering and who stands to lose most? Can science prove it safe and can it be fixed if it goes wrong?

The genetically modified foods industry claims that foods can be stored longer, transported better and enhanced with anti-cancer agents, proteins, vitamins and flavours. There is no evidence to support these claims. If they can be grown in marginal land and climates, then surely this would accelerate environmental degradation. The claim that fewer pesticides are used contradicts the fact that the majority of crops released to date are herbicide tolerant to survive spraying more often and at higher degrees.

Even if we are to believe that humans have always interfered with nature and that genetic engineering will feed the world, ecologically sustain agriculture and make food cheaper, surely we as parents and consumers have the right to choose. If we as parents and consumers have concerns about genetically modified foods and safety, the environment and ethics, then we should not be denied the right to know how the food we eat is produced.

Labelling laws are still on the drafting board. Let us not have inadequate labels when they are finalised and let us make sure that they can be enforced. Full labelling must be recommended. It must be informative and comprehensive. It is critical that funding be allocated to develop a reliable testing process to ensure compliance.

Time expired.
