

quality. They are also concerned about segregating biotech and non-biotech wheat.

Most of their concerns are not much different from those expressed by NAWG in their November 2008 principles.

Planning ahead six, eight or 10 years for consumer acceptance is not an easy call for any food item, but necessary with the time needed to develop biotech traits and receive regulatory approval.

New and favourable factors

But wheat growers now have a few factors in their favour not present five years ago.

First, biotech crops have now been produced for 13 years on over 800 million hectares around the globe without illnesses from the crops.

Second, the recent episode of high food prices has reminded consumers that an adequate supply of food is the ultimate consumer value. With the world population expected to grow from the current 6.8 billion to 9.2 billion by 2050, food security will remain a major challenge.

Third, another biotech food crop, rice, is already waiting to come on stage. The Chinese regulatory authorities have done all of the required testing to move biotech insect resistant rice to market with estimated benefits of \$4.0 billion per year. Also, rice breeders may release by 2011 a 'golden rice' genetically engineered to fight vitamin A deficiency in developing countries.

As in all markets where regulations do not preclude making choices, consumers will decide if biotech wheat will succeed.

Ross Korves is an economist with Truth About Trade and Technology. This is a non-profit advocacy group based in Iowa, US, supporting global free trade and biotechnology. For more information see: www.truthabouttrade.org ■

Bridge the gap to feed the world

World food security will not exist without increasing yields in 'lagging regions', declared Dr Marco Ferroni, Executive Director of the Syngetta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture, on his recent Australian visit.

Raising yields in developed countries like Australia is important, but this alone is not enough.

"To feed the world we must raise the productivity of all farmers, but especially smallholders in developing countries where the yield gap is the greatest," Marco said.

"Yields must rise in lagging regions, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia, where there is a large rural population whose livelihood and food security depends on agriculture and therefore improved yields."

According to Marco, while Australia remains one of the world's key grain exporters, developing countries must raise their own food supplies or else face ongoing food shortages as the world's population increases and global diets change.

Productivity growth is still increasing, but at a reduced rate. In the 1960s and 1970s, yield was increasing by between three and four per cent each year. Since 2000, yield growth has dropped to under two per cent each year.



Dr Marco Ferroni.

The rate of population growth, meanwhile, has also decreased – but at a slower rate than yield growth.

The results of this are a significant decline in world grain stocks and a trend towards rising grain prices.

While Australia's contribution does help to stabilise markets, this country's wheat exports make up only two per cent of the world's grain consumption. In fact, grain from the world's top eight exporters only makes

up 20 per cent of total consumption. The rest comes from local markets.

"In developing countries, smallholders (farming properties under two hectares) make up the largest proportion of agricultural businesses," Marco said. "For example in China, 98 per cent of farms are less than two hectares, while in Bangladesh this is 92 per cent and in India it is 85 per cent.

"In Burkina Faso, the average farm size is closer to four hectares, but poor quality land puts major restrictions on agricultural yields," Marco explained.

"If we only increase production in developed countries, the result will be food aid forever – and that is just not sustainable.

"We must not only intensify agriculture, as was done in the 'Green Revolution' during the 1970s, but we must intensify sustainably, using land and water wisely." ■

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