

## New Forms of GMOs Highlight Biosecurity Loophole

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Threats posed by new forms of GMOs under development represent a fundamental challenge to New Zealand's approach to biosecurity labelling requirements.

Food plants genetically engineered to produce pharmaceuticals and industrial substances are being field trialled in the US and carry a wholly different level of risk for New Zealand's environment and the integrity of its food supply, according to a Sustainability Council report released today.

A relatively new treaty that regulates the international trade in living GMOs, the Cartagena Protocol, has the potential to be a leading tool in checking the unintended flow of such GMOs across the border.

However, at the last meeting of the parties to the Protocol in May, New Zealand vetoed the development of rules that would oblige anyone sending food and animal feed to specify not just the intended content of shipments but the actual content, as it relates to living GMOs. New Zealand was one of just two countries – of 119 present - to object to proposals for requiring actual content of these shipments to be labelled. It was also the only one to question whether liability rules were required at all under the Protocol.

Its position to date appears to have been driven by concerns that labelling requirements would create additional costs for New Zealand's conventional agricultural exporters. However these exporters are increasingly required to give assurances that food products have no detectable GMO content as a result of strong consumer resistance in major markets to GMOs of any form, and at any level.

It is the potential "unintended" flow of GMOs across the border and into the environment and the food chain that is the bigger issue for New Zealand. Small amounts of these new forms of GMOs can do the same damage whether or not their import is intended. Mainstream institutions recognise that new forms of GMOs in particular pose environmental risks that differ from other organisms, and any contamination of food by GMOs carrying pharmaceuticals would have very serious commercial consequences. Yet prior clearance is currently required under the Hazardous Substances and New Organisms Act only if GMOs are "knowingly" imported.

The Council's report, *Brave New Biosecurity*, concludes that it is very likely that on the basis of trade interests alone the nation should be a supporter of strict labelling rules for unintended GMO content, not an ardent opponent. When the parties to the Protocol meet again next week, New Zealand has the chance to realign its stance.