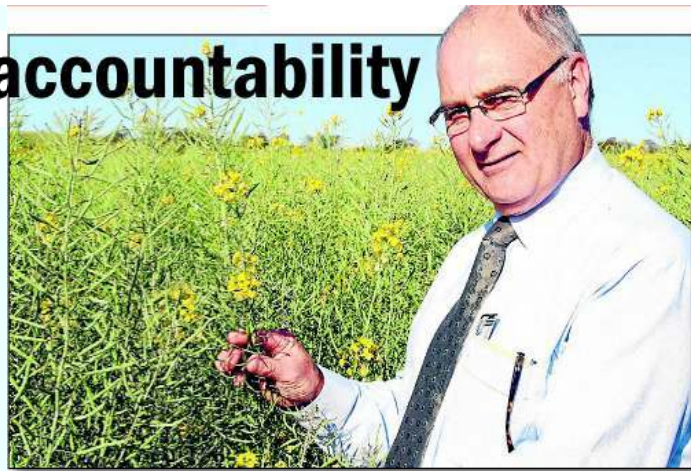




# Ellis slams GM report accountability



□ Agricultural Region MLC Brian Ellis

By **COLIN BETTLES**

AGRICULTURAL Region MLC Brian Ellis has raised questions in Parliament about the tendering protocol and taxpayer accountability for a controversial animal feeding trial on Genetically Modified (GM) canola.

The \$92,000 animal feeding study was approved by the WA Labor Government in 2007.

It is being supervised by Dr Judy Carman and conducted at the Institute of Health and Environmental Research (IHER) in Adelaide.

However, Agriculture and Food Minister Terry Redman is having difficulty getting hold of information on how the Government funding is being spent and when the study's final results will be published.

Edstar Genetics principal, Dr Ian Edwards, a member of the GM reference group, established by former Agriculture Minister Kim Chance, recently called for a Parliamentary inquiry into the feeding trial's whereabouts.

Dr Edwards and three of his colleagues have also highlighted the fact IHER consists of three people with a PO Box number and a website, and has "no track record of publications in the field on critical animal feeding studies".

"The real issue with the study is what has happened to the \$92,000 of WA taxpayers' money that was ordered by the previous Labor State Government," Dr Edwards said in a letter to *Farm Weekly* last week.

Mr Ellis said it was not his intention to get caught up in issues between scientists about Dr Carman's scientific credibility.

However, he said he had major concerns over public accountability for the \$92,000 allocated to the trial by the former State Labor Government.

Mr Ellis said that was his primary motivation for raising the five questions in Parliament last week.

"Why can't the minister get hold of a progress report?" he asked.

"I think he has the right to ask for it and get some feedback on the progress of taxpayers' dollars."

Mr Ellis, an experienced farmer and canola grower from Bindi Bindi, said he was also extremely concerned by the trial's original tender process.

He said the proponents of the GM canola animal feeding trial would have trouble claiming the independence of their work, because the study was not put out to tender.

"Dr Carman is known to be an anti-GM supporter, but aside from that why wouldn't you have a tender process?" he said.

"You would have to ask if the trial was in fact a \$92,000 set-up, designed to get the result that the previous minister wanted.

"I can't understand why the current minister is not being properly informed.

"There are quite a few questions.

"We need to know if this \$92,000 is being spent legitimately and when the results of this trial are going to be released?

"Is it going to be released at a time to try and embarrass the Minister?"

Dr Carman was quoted in media reports earlier this week saying consumers had no way of identifying household products with GM canola oil.

Mr Ellis said overall, he believed Mr Redman was being "very upfront" in his handling of the GM issue, and the large scale commercial GM canola trials being held on 850 hectares of farmland in WA this season.

"These may be considered unfair questions by some; but I think they are legitimate questions for the taxpayers of this state," he said.

"There are some legitimate concerns here and that's why I asked these questions and that's why I'm still asking them."

Despite his Party's staunch opposition to the use of GM crops in WA, Shadow Agriculture Minister Mick Murray has declined to com-



ment and buy into the public accountability issue of Dr Carman's feeding trial.

However, in speaking to *Farm Weekly* recently, Mr Chance said there was nothing to fear over the animal feeding study.

He said its results would be reported according to normal scientific processes and if there was anything unusual about the study, it would be obvious at the time of publication.

When he approved the trials, Mr Chance made no requirement for Dr Carman to provide regular, written reports to the Government during the course of trials.

He also said his government made no provisions in the agreement to cater for the possibility of a change in government, because they expected the trials to be finished by the time of the last election.

"No concern was ever raised with me about the trial's progress because our Government was given regular information from ongoing updates," he said.

Pastoralists and Graziers Association grains policy director Sheldon Mumby said Labor should be made to repay the \$92,000 to WA taxpayers, because they authorised the trial.

"Why was this animal feeding trial needed?" he said.

"Was there not enough scientific data already?"

"Why did the work have to go outside the state?"

"Do we not have the scientific expertise needed to do the work here?"

Adding fuel to the fire, Dr Brian John, from GM free Cymru, wrote to Mr Redman and *Farm Weekly* last week, expressing his dissatisfaction with the minister's handling of the issue and reporting on it.

GM Free Cymru is a community pressure group based in Mathry, Pembrokeshire, which campaigns to keep Wales free of genetically-modified crops

"Over the course of many years of observing the "GM debate" worldwide, we have never seen anything like it, and we are quite frankly appalled that a senior politician such as yourself has become involved in the denigration and even vilification of a group of scientists who were quite properly awarded funding for a piece of scientific work and who really want nothing to do with party politics," Dr John said in his letter to Mr Redman.

"The sight of you using this scientific project

as a political football is not a very edifying one.

"We have no problem at all with politicians who make policy and change policy; that is their right, and that is what they are elected to do.

"But we do have a major problem when politicians seek to undermine academic freedom and become involved in cheap attacks on working scientists."

In his correspondence to *Farm Weekly*, Dr John said he was disgusted by the witch-hunt against Dr Carman, who has been awarded "perfectly properly, and within the rules", WA funding for a study into GM crop safety.

"Your paper, sadly, appears to have played its part in this witch-hunt, in particular by reporting the comments of Agriculture and Food Minister Terry Redman and by giving space to Dr Ian Edwards, whose purpose in life is to promote the interests of the GM corporations," he said.

"Maybe you just report what happens and what gets fed to you - but can we say that it is grossly unfair, and indeed unethical, for a senior politician to become directly involved - on the record - in the denigration of a working scientist.

"We have never seen anything like it before, anywhere in the world.

"We have written to Terry Redman to express our condemnation of his actions, and to ask him to show due respect for academic freedom and scientific ethics."

Mr Redman has ruled out using Dr Carman's animal feeding study as part of his review of the GM Crops Free Areas Act 2003, which is likely to produce a decision on the future of GM canola in WA, when Parliament re-sits next January.

Dr Edwards said Mr Chance admitted to the GM reference group that \$92,000 was unlikely to provide much, but "may provide questions for future investigation".

"To claim that supporters of GM technology wanted it to go ahead in WA regardless of the consequences is just another disingenuous statement," he said.

"After approval by regulatory authorities in a number of countries, approval by independent medical academies, the UN, OECD, FAO WHO, the Royal Society etc, and 13 years of experience with the technology, this is hardly high risk stuff.

"The real paranoia lies with the hard-line anti-GM ideologues who openly disregard the overwhelming body of evidence.

"Sadly, I would have to put Minister Chance in this category.

"He was provided with a list of over 100 references to animal feeding studies but chose to ignore them, making the extraordinary claim that this \$92,000 study was going to be a "first"."