



4 March 2024

Zelka Linda Grammer
Chair
GE Free Tai Tokerau (in food & environment)
By email: linda.grammer@gmail.com

Tēnā koe Zelka

I refer to your information request dated 2 February 2024 made under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act). You have requested information in relation to the research project titled 'Whatu rarange o ngā koiora – weaving cultural authority into gene-drives targeting wasps'.

Please see below our response to your request.

1. Is this a correct quote from Professor Peter Dearden of Otago University (and Genomics Aotearoa co-director):

"I am agnostic really," said Dearden, on the release of the developed wasp. "If gene-drives are shown to be effective and safe, that is one thing. If gene-drives are shown to be neither safe, nor effective, then the project will definitively demonstrate this, allowing us to move on to other solutions".

Yes, this is a correct quote from Professor Peter Dearden. To clarify, the project aims to test gene drives in containment, to determine whether this technology is effective, safe and viable. There will be no release of wasps and there is no funding for release. This quote was Professor Dearden's response to a question on the future potential of the technology.

2. Did Peter Dearden/Otago University (or Genomics Aotearoa) apply to the EPA NZ for permission for the experimentation with GE wasps/gene drive?

Professor Dearden has EPA permission to do this work, in containment, on a model wasp species.

3. What is the application # (of your MBIE funded research) i.e., EPA #

The MBIE grant number is UOOX2306.

The EPA application number is APP201859.

4. Please send us a copy of your application to the EPA (and/or MBIE)

Please see attached a copy of the funding proposal that was submitted to MBIE. Having given careful attention to public interest considerations in accordance with section 9(1) of the Act, we have redacted some parts of the attached application where we consider that good reasons exist for withholding information. We consider that these redactions are necessary to:

- protect the privacy of natural persons, pursuant to section 9(2)(a) of the Act. These redactions include the names, contact details, qualifications, and other identifying details of individuals mentioned in the application.
- enable the University to carry out, without prejudice or disadvantage, commercial activities, consistent with section 9(2)(i) of the Act.
- protect information where the making available of the information would be likely unreasonably to prejudice the commercial position of the person who supplied or who is the subject of the information, consistent with section 9(2)(b)(ii) of the Act.
- protect information which is subject to an obligation of confidence, pursuant to section 9(2)(ba)(i) of the Act.
- prevent the disclosure of use of official information for improper gain or improper advantage, pursuant to section 9(2)(k) of the Act.

The EPA application (to obtain approval for new organisms in containment) is already publicly available on the EPA [website](#). As you are able to access this information yourself, I am refusing this part of your request under section 18(d) of the Act as the information is publicly available.

5. What conditions of approval were a requirement?

A control required by the EPA approval is that the approved organism(s) must be contained. Further controls required by the approval are able to be viewed in the EPA Approval and Decision documents, which are both publicly available on the EPA website as noted above.

6. What monitoring of Otago University/Peter Dearden/Genomics Aotearoa compliance with the conditions of approval will be done, by whom, and at what intervals? i.e., who will be monitoring the compliance of Peter Dearden/Otago University/Genomics Aotearoa with EPA conditions of approval (or requirements of funder MBIE)

A compliance inspection will be completed every six months by the Ministry of Primary Industries (MPI), and every six months by the University of Otago's internal inspection process.

7. Was this application publicly notified (and when)?

The project was publicly announced by MBIE on 15 September 2023 when Endeavour Grant recipients were announced on their [website](#).

Section 53(2) of the Hazardous Substances and New Organisms Act 1996 provides that an application may be publicly notified by the EPA if it considers that there is likely to be significant public interest. The application was not considered to meet the threshold of significant public interest and therefore was not publicly notified (this information is publicly available in the EPA Decision document, publicly available on the EPA website as noted above).

8. What public consultation with key stakeholders or the general public (including Māori/Iwi/hapū) did Peter Dearden/Otago University undertake before lodging the application for funding (if any)?

Consultation with stakeholders, the general public, and mana whenua is an inherent part of the research that this project is proposing. Information on how stakeholders, the general public, and mana

whenua will be consulted throughout the project is detailed in the attached funding proposal submitted to MBIE.

9. Please provide full details of the containment facilities (laboratory only) for your proposed research (GE wasps/gene drive) and the level of PC containment

The laboratory is an already-built MPI PC2 Invertebrate Containment Facility located in the University's Biochemistry Department. Access is restricted to appropriately trained and authorised personnel.

10. Did Peter Dearden/Otago University/Genomics Aotearoa notify local councils of your plan to undertake this controversial research in the Dunedin area? If so, which councils did you notify?

Local councils were not notified of the research. Council notification was not required because the work is happening in containment, and there will not be any release of organisms into the environment. On that basis, we decline this part of your request pursuant to section 18(g) of the Act as the information requested is not held by the University.

11. When were the "new" labs in Dunedin constructed and to what standard?

There are no "new" labs. Existing laboratory space at the University is being used for this research.

12. What government funding (if any from MBIE or any other agency) has been given to non-GE/gene drive research to exotic wasp pest suppression/eradication

We have interpreted this part of your request to be for research funding Professor Dearden has received in relation to "non-GE/gene drive research to exotic wasp pest suppression/eradication".

In addition to the research project that is the subject of your overall request, Professor Dearden has received funding for two further research projects that are within scope of this particular question:

Project Title	Funder	Total Value	Time Period
New Zealand's Biological Heritage – Project 2.2. Novel wasp control technology	MBIE	\$434,167	2016 – 2019
Next-generation technologies for pest control: gene silencing for invasive wasp control	MBIE	\$86,079	2019 – 2022

13. What is Otago University's (Peter Dearden) position/policy on liability, so that in the event of breaches of conditions of approval by Genomics Aotearoa and its staff or other unintended/unforeseen adverse impacts of EPA approved activities, will Peter Dearden or the University be financially liable?

The University does not have a policy or formal position in respect of liability as such. However, ultimately, the University and/or Professor Dearden's financial liability in respect of the approved activities would be as outlined in the applicable legislation.

On that basis, we reject this part of your request pursuant to section 18(g) of the Act as the information requested is not held by the University. We note that under the Ombudsman's guidance in respect of section 18(g), the University is not obliged to create information in order to respond to a request. We are also not required to provide requesters with formal legal advice.

14. What safeguards have been put in place to protect NZ indigenous biodiversity, including native wasps and bees once any laboratory work on exotic wasps is undertaken?

There has been no need to put any safeguards in place specifically related to the protection of New Zealand indigenous biodiversity, as all of the work is taking place in containment. On that basis, we decline this part of your request pursuant to section 18(g) of the Act as the information requested is not held by the University.

15. What plan (if any) exists for release of GE/gene drive wasps (Peter Dearden/Otago University/Genomics Aotearoa) in New Zealand?

There are no plans for release. As noted above, the project intends to determine whether this technology is safe in containment. On that basis, we decline this part of your request pursuant to section 18(g) of the Act as the information requested is not held by the University.

16. What species of wasp are you experimenting on?

Nasonia vitripennis – a laboratory species of wasp that is used as a model system.

I trust that this information will be helpful.

In the above cases, we consider that good reasons exist for withholding information, and this is not outweighed by other considerations which would make it desirable, in the public interest, to make the information available.

If you are not satisfied with our response to your information request, section 28(3) of the Act provides you with the right to ask an Ombudsman to investigate and review this response. However, we would welcome the opportunity to discuss any concerns with you first.

Ngā mihi



Kelsey Kennard
Official Information and Compliance Coordinator
Office of the Registrar