

19 GENETICALLY MODIFIED ORGANISMS

CONTEXT

Genetic modification (GM) refers to a set of techniques that alter genetic makeup by adding, deleting or moving genes (within or between species) to produce new and different organisms. Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are products of genetic modification. Another term often used to refer to the same technique is genetic engineering (GE).

A wide range of GM products are being researched and developed for commercialisation. While the GMOs commercialised to date are, in general, directed at reducing harvest losses by combating pests and viruses, research into future varieties is attempting to considerably widen the scope of applications. This includes improved growth in plants, improved tolerance to environmental conditions, and creating entirely new products and sectors of economic activity in agriculture, horticulture, plantation forestry, dairying, aquaculture and medicine.

The absolute and relative benefits associated with the development and use of GMOs is continually being redefined as this and other forms of applied biotechnology advance. However there remains scientific uncertainty with respect to potential adverse effects of GMOs on natural resources and ecosystems. The risks could be substantial and certain consequences irreversible. Once released into the environment, most GMOs would be very difficult to eradicate even if the funding were available for this, irrespective of the consequences. If the GMO is related to a food product, the “GE Free” food producer status of a district or region would likely be permanently lost, along with any marketing advantages that status confers.

The relevant legislation which applies to the management of GMOs in New Zealand is the Hazardous Substances and New Organisms Act 1996 (HSNO Act). The HSNO Act establishes the legal framework for assessments by the national regulator, the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA). This Act sets minimum standards (section 36) and provides for the EPA to set additional conditions that are to apply to a particular GMO activity.

While the HSNO Act provides the means to set conditions on the management of GMOs within a specific geographic area or irrespective of location, councils have jurisdiction under sections 30 and 31 of the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA) to control land and water use activities involving field trials and the release of GMOs, to promote sustainable management under the RMA.

Local regulation can address key gaps that have been identified in the national regulatory regime for the management of GMOs, in particular the absence of liability provisions and the lack of a mandatory precautionary approach. Benefits of local level regulation, in addition to the controls set by the EPA, include:

- Ensuring GM operators are financially accountable in the long-term through bonding and financial fitness provisions for the full costs associated with the GMO activity. This includes accidental or unintentional contamination, clean-up, monitoring and remediation.
- Adoption of a precautionary approach to manage potential risks (economic, environmental, social and cultural) associated with the outdoor use of GMOs.
- Protection of local/regional marketing advantages through reducing risks associated with market rejection and loss of income from GM contamination of non-GM crops, and negative effects on marketing, branding and tourism opportunities.
- Addressing cultural concerns of Maori, particularly given that Maori make up a considerably greater proportion of the population in Northland than is represented nationally.

Given a council’s general duties of care for its financial position and that of its constituents, there is a ready justification for councils to enforce mandatory conditions to provide for both financial accountability and avoidance of economic damage. These controls would act in addition to those that may be set by the EPA under the HSNO Act.

19.1 ISSUES

- 19.1.1 The outdoor use of GMOs can adversely affect the environment, economy, and social and cultural resources and values, and significant costs can result from the release of a GMO.

19.2 ENVIRONMENTAL OUTCOMES EXPECTED

- 19.2.1 Manage risk and avoid adverse effects on people, communities, tangata whenua, the economy and the environment associated with the outdoor use of GMOs.

- 19.2.2 Provide the framework for a unified approach to the management of the outdoor use of GMOs in the Far North to address cross-boundary effects.
- 19.2.3 Ensure accountability by GMO operators for the full costs related to the monitoring of GMO activities, and any migration of GMOs beyond specified areas, including unintentional GM contamination.
- 19.2.4 Ensure accountability by GMO operators for compensation via performance bonds in the event that the activity under their operation results in adverse effects to third parties or the environment.

19.3 OBJECTIVES

- 19.3.1 The environment, including people and communities and their social, economic and cultural well being and health and safety, is protected from potential adverse effects associated with the outdoor use, storage, cultivation, harvesting, processing or transportation of GMOs through the adoption of a precautionary approach, including adaptive responses, to manage uncertainty and lack of information.
- 19.3.2 The sustainable management of the natural and physical resources of the district with respect to the outdoor use of GMOs, a significant resource management issue identified by the community.

19.4 POLICIES

- 19.4.1 To adopt a precautionary approach by prohibiting the general release of a GMO, and by making outdoor field trialling of a GMO a discretionary activity.
- 19.4.2 To ensure that a resource consent granted for the outdoor field trialling of a GMO is subject to conditions that ensures that the consent holder is financially accountable (to the extent possible) for any adverse effects associated with the activity, including clean-up costs and remediation, including via the use of bonds.
- 19.4.3 To ensure that a resource consent granted for the outdoor field trialling of a GMO is subject to conditions that serve to avoid, as far as can reasonably be achieved, risk to the environment from the use, storage, cultivation, harvesting, processing or transportation of a GMO.
- 19.4.4 To ensure that a resource consent granted for the outdoor field trialling of a GMO is subject to a condition requiring that monitoring costs are met by the consent holder.
- 19.4.5 To require consent holders for a GMO activity to be liable (to the extent possible) for any adverse effects caused beyond the site for which consent has been granted for the activity.
- 19.4.6 To adopt an adaptive approach to the management of the outdoor use, storage, cultivation, harvesting, processing or transportation of a GMO in the district through periodic reviews of these plan provisions, particularly if new information on the benefits and/or adverse effects of a GMO activity becomes available.

19.5 METHODS OF IMPLEMENTATION

DISTRICT PLAN METHODS

- 19.5.1 Rules in the Plan to control GMO Field Trails and prohibit the release of GMOs in the Far North.
- 19.5.2 Where resource consents are required to undertake GMO activities protection of the environment, economy, society and cultural values may be achieved by imposing conditions of consent.

OTHER METHODS

- 19.5.3 The Council will liaise with other Councils in order to achieve an integrated approach to GMOs in Northland.
- 19.5.4 The Council will encourage all applicants to actively engage with the public and tangata whenua through early dialogue when developing land use proposals to ensure that adverse effects are avoided, remedied or mitigated.

COMMENTARY

The outdoor use of GMOs has the potential to cause adverse effects on the environment, economy and social and cultural wellbeing. The objectives and policies seek to protect the community and receiving environment from risk associated with any GMO activity.

The application of a precautionary approach to the outdoor use, storage, cultivation, harvesting, processing or transportation of GMOs in the district shall mean that:

- *The release of a GMO is prohibited (this is to avoid the risk that significant adverse environmental effects will arise, including adverse effects on the economy, community and/or tangata whenua resources and values); and*
- *Outdoor field trialling of a GMO (where the proponents of such activities have prior approval of the EPA) shall be a discretionary activity.*

Pastoral farming, dairying, horticulture and forestry are important land uses in the Far North and are major contributors to the local and regional economy. Therefore there are a range of outdoor GMOs that GMO developers could consider using in the district or region, including GM food crops, trees, animals, and pharma crops. The potential for adverse effects, including accidental contamination, resulting from the outdoor use of GMOs poses a “risk” to the community and environment. By specifying classes of GMOs and applying standards to the outdoor use of GMOs, the risks associated with their use, storage, cultivation, harvesting, processing or transportation can be reduced.

Within the Far North, this will involve managing and limiting the outdoor use of GMOs. Further, performance standards will be used to mitigate any adverse effects associated with contamination of GMOs beyond the subject site, thereby reducing the risks to the community, environment and economy.

Accidental or unintentional migration of GMOs that result in GMO contamination and subsequent clean-up and remediation can be expensive. Council therefore requires a GMO operator to meet all potential costs associated with the activity and will secure long-term financial accountability through appropriate standards and bonding provisions.

The EPA is not obligated to set monitoring requirements as a part of its approval process, and can only require monitoring where it is relevant to assessing environmental risk. Under section 35 of the RMA, a council has a duty to monitor, which can be expensive. Requiring a GMO operator to meet the costs of monitoring, via consent conditions, ensures the costs are met by the activity operator.

To avoid foreclosure of potential opportunities associated with a GMO development that could benefit the district or region, there is the ability to review a particular GMO activity if it were to become evident during the field trial stage or in light of other new information that a particular GMO activity would be of net benefit to the district or region and that potential risks can be managed to the satisfaction of Council. A council or a GMO proponent can initiate a plan change to change the status of a GMO activity.

19.6 RULES

Activities affected by this Section of the Plan must comply not only with the rules in this Section, but also with the relevant standards applying to the zone in which the activity is located (refer to **Part 2 - Environment Provisions**), and with other relevant standards in **Part 3 – District Wide Provisions**.

19.6.1 PERMITTED ACTIVITIES

An activity is a permitted activity if:

- (a) it complies with the standards for permitted activities set out in **Rules 19.6.1.1** below; and
- (b) it complies with the relevant standards for permitted activities in the zone in which it is located, set out in **Part 2 of the Plan - Environment Provisions**; and
- (c) it complies with the other relevant standards for permitted activities set out in **Part 3 of the Plan - District Wide Provisions**.

19.6.1.1 INDOOR USE AND RESEARCH INVOLVING GENETICALLY MODIFIED ORGANISMS

GMOs that are not specifically provided for in **19.6.2 Discretionary Activities** and **19.6.3 Prohibited Activities** below are a permitted activity. These include (but are not limited to):

- (a) Research within contained laboratories involving GMOs;
- (b) Veterinary Vaccines using GMOs; and
- (c) Medical applications involving the manufacture and use of non-viable GM products.

Note: Such activities may require consents and / or permits under other legislation / plans.

19.6.2 DISCRETIONARY ACTIVITIES

An activity is a discretionary activity if:

- (a) it does not comply with one or more of the standards for permitted activities as set out under **Rule 19.6.1.1**; but
- (b) it complies with **all rules of 19.6.2.1 Genetically Modified Organisms Field Trials, 19.6.2.2 Bond Requirements and 19.6.2.3 Monitoring Costs** below; and
- (b) it complies with the relevant standards for permitted, controlled, restricted discretionary or discretionary activities in the zone in which it is located, set out in **Part 2 of the Plan - Environment Provisions**; and
- (c) it complies with the other relevant standards for permitted, controlled, restricted discretionary or discretionary activities set out in **Part 3 of the Plan - District Wide Provisions**.

The Council may impose conditions of consent on a discretionary activity or it may refuse consent to the application. When considering a discretionary activity application, the Council will have regard to the assessment criteria set out under **Section 19.7**.

If an activity does not comply with the standards for a discretionary activity, it will be a non-complying activity unless it is a prohibited activity subject to **Section 19.6.3** below.

19.6.2.1 GENETICALLY MODIFIED ORGANISMS FIELD TRIALS

Outdoor field trialling of a GMO (where the proponents of such activities have prior approval of the EPA) shall be a discretionary activity.

Applications must provide:

- (a) Evidence of approval from the EPA for the specific GMO for which consent is sought.
- (b) Details of proposed containment measures for the commencement, duration and completion of the proposed activity.
- (c) Details of the species, its characteristics and lifecycle, to which the GMO activities will relate.
- (d) Research on adverse effects to the environment and economy associated with the activity should GMOs escape from the activity area, and measures that will be taken to avoid, remedy or mitigate such effects.
- (e) Evidence of research undertaken that characterises and tests the GMO, and the certainty associated with the accuracy of that information.
- (f) A management plan outlining ongoing research and how monitoring will be undertaken during, and potentially beyond, the duration of consent.
- (g) Details of areas in which the activity is to be confined.
- (h) Description of contingency and risk management plans and measures.

19.6.2.2 BOND REQUIREMENTS

Council requires the applicant for the resource consent to provide a performance bond (akin to a bank guarantee) in respect of the performance of any one or more conditions of the consent, including conditions relating to monitoring required of the GMO activity (prior to, during and after the activity), and that this be available for payment to redress any adverse environmental effects and any other adverse effects to third parties (including economic effects) that become apparent during or after the expiry of the consent.

The exact time and manner of implementing and discharging the bond shall be decided by, and be executed to the satisfaction of Council.

Matters that will be considered when determining the amount of the bond are:

- (a) What adverse effects could occur and the potential significance, scale and nature of those effects, notwithstanding any measures taken to avoid those effects.
- (b) The degree to which the operator of the activity has sought to avoid those adverse effects, and the certainty associated with whether the measures taken will avoid those effects.
- (c) The level of risk associated with any unexpected adverse effects from the activity.
- (d) The likely scale of costs associated with remediating any adverse effects that may occur.

- (e) The timescale over which effects are likely to occur or arise.
- (f) The extent of monitoring that may be required in order to establish whether an adverse effect has occurred or whether any adverse effect has been appropriately remedied.

19.6.2.3 MONITORING COSTS

A GMO discretionary activity may require monitoring during, and beyond the duration of consent. Monitoring is to be carried out by either the Council or consent holder with appropriate reporting procedures to the relevant regulatory authority.

A monitoring strategy for a GMO discretionary activity can include the following matters:

- (a) Inspection schedules for the site, storage areas and equipment (daily, weekly, monthly, events based).
- (b) Testing of procedures (e.g. accidental release response).
- (c) Training programmes for new staff, updates for existing staff.
- (d) Audits of sites and site management systems.
- (e) Sample testing of plants and soils in neighbouring properties for the presence of migrated GMOs.

19.6.3 PROHIBITED ACTIVITIES

19.6.3.1 OUTDOOR RELEASE OF GENETICALLY MODIFIED ORGANISMS

Outdoor release of food-related and non-food-related Genetically Modified Organisms, not otherwise provided for in **Rules under 19.6.1** and **19.6.2 above** is a prohibited activity.

19.7 NOTIFICATION

All applications for resource consent under rule 19.6.2 must be publicly notified.

19.8 ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

The matters set out in s104 and s105, and in Part II of the Act, apply to the consideration of all resource consents for land use activities.

In addition to these matters, the Council shall also apply the relevant assessment matters set out below.

- (a) Site design conditions should ensure GMO sites are designed and managed in a manner that avoids or minimises risks of adverse effects from activities carried out on the site. This shall include provisions to prevent the migration of GMOs beyond the area designated for the activity.
- (b) Ensure the transportation of GMOs is carried out in a manner that minimises the risk of adverse effects by preventing the escape of GMOs from the transporting vehicles. Appropriate procedures must be in place to ensure that any vehicle visiting the site is thoroughly cleaned and checked prior to leaving the site to avoid unintentional GMO transportation.
- (c) Reporting requirements by the consent holder will be stipulated in the consent conditions.
- (d) Where necessary, more stringent measures than those required under the provisions of the HSNO Act may be imposed to manage potential risks. A review clause (pursuant to Section 128 of the Act) may be included in any conditions, where deemed necessary, to address any future changes in technology, and the scope of environmental, economic and cultural effects.
- (e) The duration of any consent will be aligned with EPA approval terms.