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Dear <name>,

I was interested to see recently that you signed up to the Greenpeace charter for “Chefs for a GM Free Australia”.

I was surprised and thought I should provide you with some information about why research agencies like CSIRO do genetic modification (GM) research and why we think it is an important technology that should not be boycotted but should be actively supported.

Firstly, we support your position that the quality, diversity and flavour of our food should be maintained and even enhanced and that our food supply should be safe. We also agree that our agricultural systems that produce our food should be environmentally sustainable and we further think they should be profitable for farmers.

Our research aims to deliver practical solutions to help build profitable and sustainable agrifood, fibre and horticultural industries, develop new plant products and improve natural resource management. Conventional plant breeding and GM plant breeding are some of the tools we believe will help towards this aim.

Essentially GM is a modern way to breed new plants. It is no less or more natural than other forms of plant breeding. I have included some additional information on conventional and GM plant breeding.

GM breeding is not less safe than other forms of plant breeding and GM crops undergo more testing than any other type of food crop to ensure they are safe for the environment and humans. It is untrue to say that GM food has not been tested for human safety. It has, and very widely. These independently reviewed tests have not found any connection between health problems and GM. I can provide you with a list of some of these studies. The reports that I have seen that are presented as evidence against GM and are claimed to show a negative impact are not scientifically valid and, most importantly, they are not independently reviewed.

It is true that oils from GM canola will not be labelled under current Australian law. This is because the oil from the GM canola plants approved for growing in Australia will not contain genes or protein and the final product will be indistinguishable from non-GM canola oil. Food Standards Australia and New Zealand can provide you with more information about labelling and food safety testing.

A 2005 report from the government agency Biotechnology Australia (BA) suggests it is hard to gauge consumer opinion on GM food as many factors affect a person's opinion. Statistics can be found and presented to support either side. BA did note however that diseases in beef that could pass on to humans; bacteria and disease in foods; hormones to accelerate growth in animals; antibiotics in meat; and pesticide residues on fruit and vegetables were all greater food issue concerns than food from GM plants.

BA found that GM products likely to be supported by consumers includes GM that has direct consumer benefits; has direct societal benefits; is not harmful to people or the environment; and is developed with consultation and regulation.

Please allow me to describe an example from my own research. Cowpeas are an important food crop in sub-Saharan Africa where they are mostly grown without pesticides. In any case, these chemicals are too expensive and otherwise inappropriate for the local farmers. However, because of pests and diseases, yields are often reduced by more than 80 per cent. With our African colleagues we are developing a GM cowpea that has 'built-in' pest protection that could boost cowpea production and help reduce food shortages at least for these very poor farmers and consumers.

A similar GM technology has been used by CSIRO Plant Industry in Australia to develop GM cotton with built-in pest protection. This GM cotton has reduced pesticide use by over 80 per cent and is now the preferred cotton variety for farmers. It has been safely and successfully grown in Australia since 1996.

We passionately believe GM should be considered as one of the options to help deliver environmentally sustainable food into the future. Already we are seeing rising food prices in the supermarkets and I am sure your business is feeling this change too. This is a result of increasing limitations on our capacity to reliably produce food worldwide to feed a growing global population.

Beyond Australia there are serious issues of food shortages and many people are suffering for lack of basic food. If we don't put steps in place to start dealing with this problem now we will have to face a much more serious threat of food shortages in the future as global population continues to grow and as environmental challenges mount.

Dismissing GM now cuts off an opportunity to develop the technology responsibly to provide the unique benefits of GM that other technologies cannot deliver. We don't think GM will be the only solution, rather it will be part of a suite of solutions – we will need many solutions to tackle the problem.

Perhaps also of relevance to you are some novel ways GM could be used. For example, the CSIRO Food Futures Flagship is developing crops that produce omega-3 oil – an important oil for human health. Most Australians don't get enough omega-3 because they either can't afford or simply don't eat enough fish, a rich source of omega-3. GM crops that produce omega-3 oils would diversify the sources of omega-3 making it more available to more people, potentially cheaper and would also reduce pressure on declining fish stocks.

As an influential leader in our community and especially in the food sector I would urge you to think more broadly about the implications of your opposition to serving GM foods in your restaurant. If we encourage our community to reject GM breeding then we reduce our options for innovation in future food production, because GM and gene technology play an important role in conventional breeding as well as in GM breeding.

I would like to invite you to visit our laboratories in Canberra where I can introduce you to some of our dedicated scientists using GM to try and improve future food production. Our Communication Unit can provide you with more information on GM and can answer general enquiries on the topic, please contact Sophie Clayton on 02 6246 5139 or sophie.clayton@csiro.au. Of course I am happy to speak with you directly too at any time.

Also, here are some links to more information you may find interesting:

CSIRO Plant Industry: www.csiro.au/pi
CSIRO's biotechnology portal: www.csiro.au/biotech
CSIRO video on GM food: www.youtube.com/CSIROplantindustry

Yours sincerely,

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