



GMO Wars: Democracy or Düsseldorf for South Australia?

Dr John Paull
john.paull@mail.com
<http://johnpaull.academia.edu/research>

South Australia (SA) has a reputation as clean and green and natural. It is a sun-blessed state, lapped by the Southern Ocean, and basks under a vast blue sky. SA takes biosecurity very seriously, and natural barriers of desert facilitate keeping out fruit fly, cane toads and other unwanted intruders.

There is a battle raging in South Australia for the integrity of its agricultural sector. SA is a world leader in organic agriculture. It accounts for 20% of the world's certified organic agriculture hectares - SA is Australia's leading state for organics (Paull & Hennig, 2018) (Figure 1). Its capital, Adelaide, hosts the world's largest organics certifier (NASAA).

There are no genetically modified crops grown in SA. There has been a GMO (genetically modified organisms) Moratorium in SA for the past two decades (beginning in 2003). While Australia is a giant in organics (accounting for 51% of world certified organic hectares) (Paull, 2019c), it is a minnow in the world of GMOs (accounting for 0.4% of the world's GMO hectares) (ISAAA, 2018).

Despite the natural advantages of SA for producing clean and green and natural food, the incumbent government appears 'hell bent' on dismantling the successful and popular SA GMO Moratorium. Most Australians (90%) do not regard GMOs as "safe" (Cormick & Mercer, 2017), and they may be right. But, whether they are right or wrong, or just right to be cautious, in the market place consumers will vote with their dollars. Globally, consumers avoid purchasing GMOs (GfK, 2017).

The SA GMO Moratorium is in place due to an Act of Parliament. There are two ways to dismantle it, by Regulation or by an Act of Parliament. Regulations can be interposed to subvert the intention of the Act. This can be regarded as shoddy governance since there is no mandatory Parliamentary oversight nor debate (Gazetted Regulations are only debated if there is a disallowance motion tabled). Alternatively, an Act can be changed by Parliament.

The incumbent Liberal (i.e. conservative) government of SA, led by Steven Marshall, appears to have a very tenuous grasp on the concept of 'democracy'. There is no mandate to dismantle the SA GMO Moratorium, but that is what they are trying for. There was a review of the GMO Moratorium and the majority (78%) of submissions supported the continuance of the Moratorium (Paull, 2019d).

The Marshall government has twice introduced Regulations to dismantle the SA GMO Moratorium. Each time, these Regulations have been disallowed by the SA Parliament (upper house) (in 2019 & 2020). The Marshall government introduced a Bill to dismantle the SA GMO Moratorium, and this has also been voted down by Parliament (in 2019).

Doing the same thing and expecting a different outcome is a popular definition of insanity. In total disregard for the democratic process, the Marshall government has re-Gazetted their Regulations to dismantle the GMO Moratorium (for the third time) (March, 2020); and perhaps ‘to be sure to be sure’ they have re-introduced their Bill dismantling the GMO Moratorium (for the second time). When they disregard consumer sentiment and the democratic process, can they wonder why politicians might be held in disdain by the public?

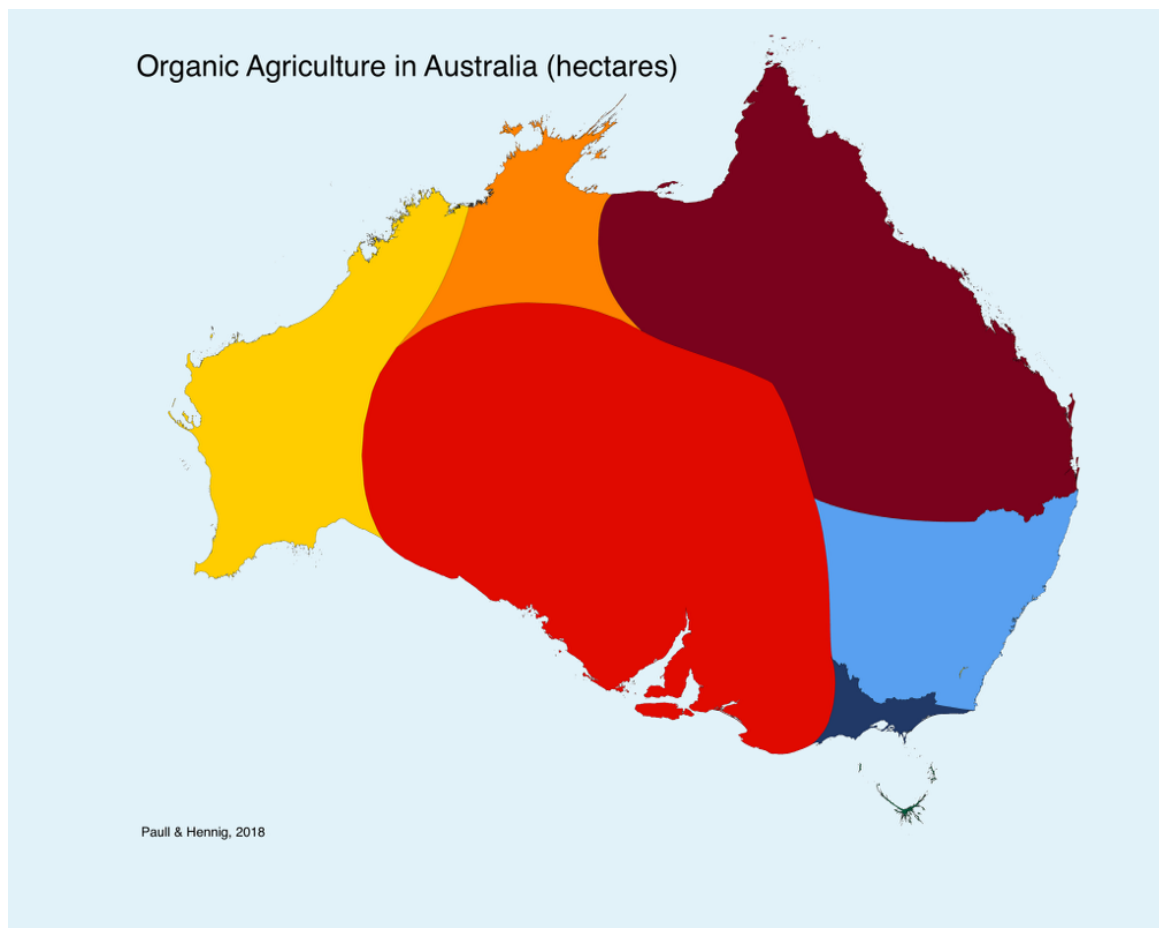


Figure 1. South Australia accounts for 40% of the certified organic hectares in Australia (cartogram source: Paull & Hennig, 2018).

SA has recently been through the bruising experience of General Motors Holden (GMH) withdrawing from Australia, without notice (ABC, 2020). There are two lessons here for SA politicians (in particular). First, without sovereignty over an industry, you are at the whim of some distant board. In the case of Holden, the axe was swung from Detroit. Second, without consumer support, an in-

dustry is dead on the ground. Holden persisted in marketing sedans (the Commodore) long after consumers (and every other manufacturer) had discovered SUVs. A recipe for fiscal pain is (a) to forfeit sovereignty of an industry and (b) to market what consumers don't want.

GMO multinationals are keen for the GMO Moratorium in SA to be abolished because they cannot grow or sell their GMOs in their own jurisdictions, in Germany (Düsseldorf is headquarters to Bayer/Monsanto), or Switzerland or China (Basel is headquarters to Syngenta, and Beijing is headquarters to ChemChina). These GMO/pesticide companies lack a social licence and government approvals for GMO-cropping in their own back yards. Instead, they are in the hunt for distant jurisdictions with folly enough to give their pariah products the tick of legitimacy (which their home jurisdictions withhold).

The Marshall government fails to make a case why a state with a high cost of production, and distant from overseas markets, should support bargain-basement crops (GM crops sell at a price penalty) (Paull, 2019b), rather than premium produce (organic crops attract a price premium). They fail to make the case for relinquishing control to Düsseldorf and other distant loci of control. They fail to make the case for compromising the integrity of the SA food chain and degrading non-GMO crops and farms by contamination with GMOs. They fail to make the case for introducing GMOs as an invasive species with no prospect of recall or reversal (Paull, 2018). Rather, they need to give thanks to the decades of SA farmers who have earned for SA the reputation as a clean and green and natural state - and build on that.

The GMO enterprise is currently stalled. Twenty years of intensive advocacy, yet GMO advocates have failed to win over the world's consumers (GfK, 2017). Global plantings of GM canola, GM cotton and GM corn are all in decline, year on year (ISAAA, 2018). GMO plantings in Australia peaked in 2010 for GM cotton, and in 2015 for GM canola (Paull, 2019a). A win for Düsseldorf is a lose for South Australia. As Humpty Dumpty observed: "The question is, which is to be master - that's all". All indications are that the battle for the SA GMO Moratorium has not yet run its course.

References

- ABC. (2020). Holden car brand, maker of Commodore and Barina, axed across Australia and New Zealand. *ABC News*, 18 Feb, <abc.net.au>.
- Cormick, C., & Mercer, R. (2017). *Community Attitudes to Gene Technology*. Prepared for The Office of the Gene Technology Regulator, Canberra, (OGTR). Sydney: Instinct and Reason.
- GfK. (2017). Decision Factors on What to Eat or Drink: Global GfK Survey (October 2017). London: GfK (Growth from Knowledge).
- ISAAA. (2018). *Pocket K No.16: Biotech Crop Highlights in 2017*. Manila: International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA).
- Paull, J. (2018). Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) as Invasive Species. *Journal of Environment Protection and Sustainable Development*, 4(3), 31-37.
- Paull, J. (2019a). The failures of genetically modified organisms (GMOs): Resistance, regulation, and rejection. *Agrofor International Journal*, 4(3), 139-152.

Paul, J. (2020). GMO Wars: Democracy or Düsseldorf for South Australia? ISDRS Newsletter (International Sustainable Development Research Society), Q1, 7.

Paul, J. (2019b). Genetically modified (GM) canola: Price penalties and contaminations. *Biomedical Journal of Scientific & Technical Research*, 17(2), 1-4.

Paul, J. (2019c). Organic Agriculture in Australia: Attaining the global majority (51%). *Journal of Environment Protection and Sustainable Development*, 5(2), 70-74.

Paul, J. (2019d). *A Review of the 'Independent Review of the South Australian GM Food Crop Moratorium' and Fourteen Alternative Findings*. Adelaide: Submission to the GM Independent Report, Primary Industries and Regions SA (PIRSA), Government of South Australia.

Paul, J., & Hennig, B. (2018). Maps of Organic Agriculture in Australia. *Journal of Organics*, 5(1), 29-39.