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GM wheat, corn in pipeline

By LYNDAL READING

GENETICALLY modified wheat and drought-tolerant corn and cotton could be on the cards for Australia.

Monsanto Scientific Affairs Asia senior director Dr Harvey Glick said drought-stress tolerant corn and cotton would be available by 2012.

"The plants will be able to withstand a moderate amount of drought, which Australian farmers face pretty much every year," Dr Glick said.

He said that, in the near-term, second and third-generation versions of existing GM products would be launched.

Dr Glick, who was in Melbourne to speak at the Ausbiotech Conference, told *The Weekly Times* Monsanto

would be willing to collaborate with CSIRO on new varieties.

"We've had a long relationship with CSIRO and we're fascinated by their wheat research," Dr Glick said.

Dr Glick said Monsanto would restart its GM wheat-breeding program and wheat products might be released in future. He said the program had been suspended while Monsanto concentrated on corn, cotton and soybeans.

Dr Glick said the research program was expanding to include sugarbeets and alfalfa and would soon include wheat.

He said research would look at lifting yields while decreasing inputs via a mixture of conventional and GM breeding.

"We will develop higher-

yielding hybrids through conventional breeding techniques," Dr Glick said.

"Then, to protect those high yields from insects and disease, we will use biotechnology.

"That will help farmers to grow more while decreasing inputs."

Dr Glick said the biotech companies had not been as effective as the anti-GM lobby groups in communicating their message.

GM technology has been attacked by lobby groups including Greenpeace, GeneEthics and Mothers Are Demystifying Genetic Engineering.

The groups raised concerns about the safety of GM foods.

Dr Glick said the lobby groups had been effective in

"communicating fear and concern".

"We could have done a better job in communicating that biotechnology is a component of sustainable agriculture," Dr Glick said. He dismissed suggestions by lobbyists that GM food was unsafe.

He said GM technology was "benign" and had passed more stringent tests than other food products.

"The World Health Organisation, the American Medical Association and the Australian Government have all said it's safe," Dr Glick said.

"The scientific community believes the products are safe."