

GM food critics 'ignorant'

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AUSTRALIA'S chief scientist has criticised opponents of genetic modification, describing them as "unprincipled minorities" that were spreading false facts and hype.

Speaking at a conference in Melbourne, Jim Peacock said those circulating misinformation about GM were largely "self-serving organic farmers and ill-informed environmental activists".

His comments were made during a session on biotechnology and food at the Future Summit, where Victoria's chief scientist, Sir Gustav Nossal, said he believed resistance to

GM was starting to wane. "The fear I think is gradually and slowly receding," Sir Gustav said after the session. "But I also think this is something that doesn't need to be rushed."

The *Sunday Age* reported last weekend that the Bracks Government was preparing to end the state's moratorium on commercial planting of GM canola, which expires at the end of next February.

But on Monday, Victorian Agriculture Minister Joe Helper denied that the Government had made up its mind, saying there would be broad consultation before any decision was made on the moratorium.

Dr Peacock, who played an

► Continued NEWS 2

GM critics ignorant, says chief scientist

◀ From PAGE 1

important role in developing GM cotton while working at the CSIRO, told yesterday's conference that gene technology had improved the world's understanding of living things, and "this new knowledge should be put to the best possible use".

"I'm saddened by the delay that has been brought about by what I think are unprincipled minorities." This group was denying Australia the environmental, health and economic benefits of biotechnology.

The Biological Farmers of Australia described Dr Peacock's comments about organic farmers as inappropriate and "a cheap shot". Greenpeace campaigner Louise Sales said the statements were "outrageous", and that those opposed to GM made up a majority of the population, not a minority.

The latest National Technology and Society Monitor, released by Swinburne University and based on a survey of 1000 people, found that a majority were uncomfortable with GM plants and animals for food.

Dr Peacock said that GM foods were unlikely to become part of the regular food supply until consumers could see a real, personal benefit from the products. "It could be convenience, and it could be cheapness, but I think the telling one will be health."

Dr Peacock said that people like himself had "probably failed miserably" in recent years to help the public gain a better understanding of gene technology.

Sir Gustav said the technology's most valuable contribution was "how it helps us to learn". "Even if we never deploy a genetically-modified food organism anywhere in the world, the amount of learning that we are doing through genetic modification in the laboratory is of the most profound importance," he said.