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national farmers union
In Union Is Strength

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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BIODIVERSITY, FOOD SECURITY UNDERMINED BY SEED SECTOR REVIEW

“Biodiversity for Food Security” is the theme chosen by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) for World Food Day, October 16. The theme highlights the importance of genetic diversity for a healthy and stable food supply.

Ironically, while the World Food Day theme celebrates farmers’ traditional function as stewards of seeds, governments in many parts of the world are introducing gene patent legislation, commercial seed contracts, and other forms of Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) to undermine farmers’ ability to freely save, exchange and re-use seed collected from their harvests.

Seed represents the most basic, compact package of agricultural genetic material, said Terry Boehm, Vice-President of the National Farmers Union (NFU). “For untold centuries, farmers have protected and propagated the world’s stock of genetic resources. This custom of saving seed has always been viewed as the farmers’ traditional right.”

Currently, farmers who retain “common seed” from their harvest can freely re-use, exchange or sell that seed without payment of royalties. But a recent Canadian initiative known as the Seed Sector Review aims to force farmers to pay royalties to corporations on farm-saved seed.

The Seed Sector Review, unveiled last May, was conducted under the auspices of the federal department of Agriculture and Agri-Food, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), the Canadian Seed Trade Association (CSTA) and other industry groups. The CSTA is on record as stating farmers have a “privilege” but not a “right” to save and re-use seed.

The NFU has been sharply critical of the Seed Sector Review’s recommendations to change Canada’s Seeds Act. NFU President Stewart Wells points out the proposals would reduce farmers’ protections while enhancing the economic power of the four largest multinational seed companies: Monsanto, Bayer, Syngenta and DuPont. “Granting these large private companies ownership of genetic material through gene patents and commercial seed contracts effectively stifles public access to these important resources,” he said.

Prior to the 1990s, seed development in Canada was a public endeavour, conducted through universities and Agriculture Canada facilities. Canadian farmers accessed new seed varieties at low cost. Other public institutions, such as the Plant Gene Resources of Canada (PGRC) gene bank, help preserve thousands of genetically diverse seeds. The NFU is calling for enshrining farmers’ rights to save seed in legislation, as well as a strengthened public plant breeding program.

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