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In Union Is Strength

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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GENETICALLY MODIFIED CROPS PUT CANADIAN MARKET ACCESS AT RISK

MONTREAL, PQ – Canada’s refusal to ratify the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety could jeopardize export markets for conventional and organic grains and oilseeds, says Colleen Ross, Women’s Vice-President of the National Farmers Union (NFU).

The Cartagena Protocol governs imports and exports of genetically-modified organisms (GMOs), and establishes negotiation deadlines for rules on labelling and tracing GMOs. The protocol also deals with liability in cases where GMO contamination causes biological and/or economic harm.

Ross, a farmer from Iroquois, Ontario, is currently attending the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) conference in Montreal as an observer. The conference includes a round of international negotiations on the Cartagena Protocol. On May 31, Ross is presenting at a side event entitled “GMOs and the Experience of Farmers Around the Globe,” where farmers from other countries will be sharing their experiences and resistance to authorization of further commercial release of GMOs.

The Cartagena Protocol applies to the transboundary movement, transit, handling and use of all GMOs that may adversely affect biological diversity and human health. The protocol requires exporters to give detailed information to recipient nations about GMO products. It also gives importers the right to reject GMO imports or donations – even without scientific proof – if they might pose a danger to traditional crops and indigenous societies.

The United States and Canadian governments are resisting the Cartagena Protocol, claiming it undermines the World Trade Organization (WTO) agreement. The WTO rules, in contrast to the Cartagena Protocol’s precautionary approach, require scientific justification for restrictions on imported commodities. The WTO agreement requires implementation of “the least trade restrictive” options.

Contamination by GM crops is a major concern for Canadian farmers. The NFU helped lead the recent fight against the introduction of GM wheat into Canada, pointing out the resulting contamination of Canada’s grain system would have decimated Canada’s wheat export markets.

Ross said while the Cartagena Protocol is flawed, it does provide a vehicle for tracking GM shipments and contamination levels. “If Canada refuses to ratify and comply with the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, we could lose market access,” she said. “We’ve had ten years of unconfined release of GMOs in Canada, yet there have never been levels

set for allowable contamination of GMOs in non-GMO shipments of grains, oilseeds and specialty products.”

She said Canada would clearly be unable to comply with the Cartagena requirement that GMO shipments be labelled until such time as appropriate segregation protocols are established. The costs and liability associated with segregation protocols should not be downloaded onto farmers.

“At the present time, non-GMO grains and oilseeds that are grown under an Identity-Preserved (IP) system may very well meet the standards set out by our trading partners,” she said. “Given the resistance of markets around the world to GMOs, it may be in the best interests of farmers at this time to steer clear of GM varieties and go back to conventional seed varieties.”

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What is the Convention on Biological Diversity?

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was formed in 1992 under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Programme.

What is the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety?

The Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety was created in 2000 as a legally-binding agreement that would address potential risks posed by GMOs. It came into effect in 2003. Canada signed the Cartagena Protocol in 2003 but has not ratified it. Other countries which have refused to sign or ratify the agreement include the United States, Argentina, Australia, New Zealand, Chile and Uruguay.