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In Union Is Strength

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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STOP FUSARIUM SITUATION FROM GETTING WORSE, SAYS NFU

The problem of fusarium blight in wheat is growing worse, and immediate steps need to be taken now to counter the spread of the disease, says the National Farmers Union (NFU).

In a presentation to the House of Commons Agriculture Committee in Ottawa October 20, National Farmers Union Youth President Nigel Smith said the hearings on the fusarium issue are welcome. He pointed out the NFU has been calling for action on this pressing issue since 2003.

Many fusarium species are plant pathogens with serious implications for farmers, their crops, livestock and the general public. “Fusarium affects wheat, barley and other small grains in both temperate and semi-tropical areas,” stated Smith. “Fusarium infections can then lead to the development of vomitoxin, or DON (deoxynivalenol). Vomitoxin is harmful, or even fatal, to livestock and humans. It would not be inappropriate to compare the worldwide increase in fusarium to the H1N1 flu pandemic.” What is most alarming is that a new, more virulent “race” of vomitoxin (chemotype 3-A) is become more prevalent.

Smith said it is important that the standards regarding fusarium blight toxin levels in wheat not be lowered. “Tightening the standards regarding fusarium will be a hardship on farmers because it will be harder to sell infected grain – even into the feed market. But this has to be balanced against livestock or human deaths. With escalating levels of vomitoxin occurring, the alternative of not tightening the standards may open the door to a reputation-destroying incident similar to BSE,” he stated. “The NFU recommends we all follow the science very closely.”

Smith said Canada’s public plant researchers have discovered a link between the incidence of fusarium and the previous use of glyphosate formulations. There appears to be a positive correlation between the widespread use of glyphosate formulations and a higher incidence of fusarium.

“Obviously, scientists and farmers need more knowledge about both fusarium and vomitoxin,” he said. “The Canadian studies on the subject all call for more research. The problem is that Canadian researchers have been hamstrung by insufficient funding, hiring

freezes, and generally poor working conditions.” He noted that it is highly unlikely that private industry, particularly those chemical companies that manufacture and sell glyphosate, will fund this type of research.

In short, added Smith, the fusarium problem and the fusarium research problem serve to highlight a severe crisis within our publicly-funded research facilities. “We desperately need better working conditions, better staffing levels of both scientists and support staff, better equipment and facilities and a new commitment to publicly-funded and publicly-owned research in Canada.”

The NFU Youth President said allowing publicly-funded Canadian research to languish, erode and eventually disappear will be “extremely detrimental to fusarium and vomitoxin research, and will not serve to protect the food supply for humans or livestock. “We cannot make good decisions unless we have reliable scientific findings based on our own conditions here in Canada.”

The NFU also recommended that in order to prevent the fusarium issue from getting worse, further registration of glyphosate-resistant crops should be suspended until the linkage to fusarium is understood.

“When we know that the previous use of glyphosate is the most important crop-production factor leading to the increased incidence of fusarium, we must simply suspend the further registration of the crops that increase the use of glyphosate. Also, certified seed lots should be tested for fusarium levels, and the results clearly reported to the seed buyers.”

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