

PLANT BREEDING IN CANADA: **Public or Private?**

There is a struggle underway for control of Canada's seed supply.

Companies such as Monsanto are pushing government to change the rules governing seed use. (See *Fact Sheet # 2 on the Seed Sector Review*) And these companies are also restructuring Canada's plant breeding systems—encouraging government to withdraw and further dismantle public plant breeding programs.

Until the 1990s, seed development in Canada was public. Researchers on the public payroll at public universities and Ag. Canada facilities developed new varieties to meet farmers' needs and then turned those varieties over to farmers at low cost. In the early '80s, the public sector did 95% of plant breeding in Canada and 100% of breeding for cereal crops and oilseeds.¹

Recently, however, transnationals have moved in to capture the profits from the seed "industry." To do so, these companies needed vast regulatory regimes. First came Plant Breeders' Rights (PBR), then gene patenting and global agreements to protect patents. Current seed company proposals are part of an attempt to construct a financial base for a high-cost, inefficient, unproductive model of private plant breeding and research.

Instead of this corporate-controlled, profit-maximizing, farmer-restricting system, Canada needs a publicly-funded, publicly-controlled plant breeding system to inexpensively and efficiently develop the seeds needed by Canadian farmers and the Canadian economy.

**If we, as a nation,
withdraw from plant
breeding, then
foreign
transnationals will
own and control
all new seeds.**

Plant breeding and seed research contribute to the public good and provide long-term benefits that cannot be recovered through short-term fees. Breeding and research require free exchange of information among farmers and researchers. Breeding and research must be publicly-funded, done in public institutions, and the results must be shared widely, at low cost, and with few restrictions.

- For an overview of the seed issue, see Fact Sheet #1: *Under attack: Farmers' right to save, re-use, and sell seed.*

The flip-side of this flyer lists actions to safeguard our public plant breeding system.

Myth: private sector breeding will deliver

Implicit in government's withdrawal from plant breeding is the faith that private companies will create the seeds our farmers need.

Big seed companies may develop new corn varieties that North American farmers can plant on millions of acres, but these companies won't develop specialized varieties such as short-season wheat for the northern prairies. There just isn't enough acreage or money to attract the transnationals. Nor will these companies do long-term research needed to develop or adapt new crops, as with canola and lentils.

Initiatives such as Plant Breeders' Rights (PBR), patenting, and charging fees on farm-saved seed are all part of an attempt to create enough profitability in the system to make a private breeding industry work. The Seed Sector Review says: "*Profitability is a perpetual concern. Industry and government systems of enforcement and compliance for breeders' rights and seed marketing are key to profitability.*" Translation: governments and companies must be aggressive in extracting royalties and in punishing farmers who don't pay. (See Fact Sheet # 2 on the Seed Sector Review)

Privatized plant breeding will fail; farmers will pay more for seeds that serve them less well; Canada will lose its ability to shape its agriculture and food systems; and research costs will increase as patenting and secrecy make research more difficult and costly.

¹ RMA Loyns and AJ Begleiter, "An examination of the potential economic effects of plant breeders' rights on Canada," Working Paper for Consumer and Corporate Affairs Canada, 1984, p.109. As cited in Devlin Kuyek's *Stolen Seeds: the Privatization of Canada's Agricultural Biodiversity*, 2004, p. 10.

Work with us to protect YOUR RIGHT to save, re-use, exchange, and sell seeds

The **National Farmers Union (NFU)** is fighting back on behalf of farm families and all Canadians who believe that the seeds of life are too important to be controlled by foreign transnationals. The NFU has launched an aggressive campaign that includes the following actions:

- Ads in major farm newspapers;
- Trade show displays to help inform farmers;
- A rural canvass to inform and organize farmers;
- Meetings with legislators;
- An NFU National Convention focused on seeds and farmers' rights (November 18-20, 2004 in Saskatoon);
- Meetings with urban allies to forge a rural/urban coalition around this issue;
- Press conferences, meetings with editorial boards, and other media work; and
- A petition to the federal parliament demanding that the government enshrine in legislation farmers' rights to save, re-use, select, exchange, and sell their seeds and that the government support farmers and the Canadian economy by expanding Canada's public plant breeding programs.

You can help in four ways:

1. Join the NFU. Working together, farmers can retain control of their seed supply.
2. Donate to our work. Your donation will help finance our work on this issue.
3. Spread the word. Talk to your neighbors and pass on this information.
4. Help collect signatures on our petition to parliament.

Petitions, fact sheets and additional information are available by calling, writing, faxing, visiting, or emailing the NFU office.

For two decades, the NFU has worked to maximize farmers' access to productive and affordable new seed varieties. Please join us to protect Canadian family farms and to create better food and agricultural policies for Canada.

To join, please send a cheque for \$150 to the address below.



NFU National Office

2717 Wentz Ave., Saskatoon, Sask., S7K 4B6

Tel (306) 652-9465 / Fax (306) 664-6226 / Email nfu@nfu.ca