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national farmers union

In Union Is Strength

National Farmers Union Policy on Genetically Modified (GM) Foods

Preamble

The NFU believes that all Canadians—farmers and non-farmers alike—must engage in an informed debate on the genetic modification of food. Citizens must examine genetically modified (GM) food in the largest possible social, historical, environmental, economic, and ethical context. After that debate, citizens—not the corporations that promote these products—must decide whether to accept or reject GM food.

Squeezed by falling incomes, farmers look to technologies that claim higher returns or reduced costs. Over the past decades, however, farmers have embraced a wide range of technologies, only to watch net farm incomes fall. Between 1974 and 2000, gross farm income tripled. Net farm income, however, fell. Input suppliers were able to capture 100% of farmers' increased gross returns. Because fertilizers, chemicals, and other technologies failed to fulfill their promises of farm profitability, many farmers rightly question the economic benefits of genetically modifying crops and livestock.

While the benefits are questionable, risks and costs are real. Consumers are rejecting GM foods. Markets in Europe, Japan, and elsewhere are closing and domestic markets are likewise threatened. This is driving prices down. Closing markets and falling prices threaten to overwhelm any small, short-term economic benefits that GM crops or livestock may offer. Further, the proliferation of some GM crops has effectively deprived many organic farmers of the option to grow those crops.

Further, GM seeds and livestock give corporations increased control over family farms. Any initial economic benefits will be quickly outweighed as farmers are drawn further under corporate control. More than any previous technology—such as fertilizers or tractors—patented seeds sold through contract and multi-page technology use agreements clearly erode farmers' autonomy.

Turning to human health, there has not been a systematic, scientific investigation of the health effects of GM foods. The unscientific assumption of “substantial equivalence” is insufficient reason to forgo comprehensive, independent health testing.

There are also many unanswered questions about the environmental risks of GM crops and livestock. Genetic modification threatens to unbalance the biosphere, create “super-weeds,” endanger beneficial insects, and erode bio-diversity. Bio-diversity is a vital source of raw materials for agriculture and an essential component of environmental well-being.

The NFU policy on GM foods recognizes that almost all of the questions surrounding this technology remain unanswered. The policy attempts to introduce precaution and prudence into a process of GM food proliferation driven by profit. Because this technology has the potential to threaten the environment, human health, and the economic wellbeing of farmers, Canadians should debate and study before we plant and eat.

General policy and action plan

1. The federal government must impose a moratorium on the production, importation, distribution, and sale of GM food until questions regarding consumer acceptance, human health, environmental implications, technology ownership, and farmer profitability are answered to the satisfaction of the majority of Canadians.
2. Until the federal government respects the wishes of the people and introduces a moratorium, the following interim measures will help protect farmers and other citizens.

Ownership and control of GM food technology

3. All genetic resources and GM technology must be subject to democratic control, collective ownership, and not-for-profit distribution.
4. Citizens through their governments, not corporations, must control genetic research and the development of GM products.
5. Public money directed to agricultural research must serve the interests of Canadians. Such money must be spent on research into sustainable systems of agriculture which improve the nutrition and safety of food, the health of the environment, and the incomes of farmers.
6. "Terminator", "Traitor", and similar Genetic Use Restriction technologies, along with the WTO's Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) agreement, restrict farmers' right to save, trade, and reuse seed. Thus, they are unacceptable.
7. Canada must work to end the export of GM foods and seeds to countries which lack adequate regulation, safety, and inspection regimes to deal with such imports.

Genetic Pollution

8. It is unreasonable to allow genetic modification companies to privately reap profits and not require that they also assume all costs. Genetic pollution is one such cost. Companies producing genetically modified seeds admit that some plants can “outcross” in an uncontrolled fashion. Genetic pollution seriously erodes the incomes of organic farmers and those who do not use GM seeds. Government must hold genetic modification companies accountable for the costs their products create for other farmers and the general public.
9. The federal government must compel companies which own patents on GM seeds or livestock to set up contingency funds to compensate for product liability and legislate efficient and accessible mechanisms to enable liability claims to be effectively pursued.

Markets and consumer acceptance

10. Food products which contain GM ingredients must be subject to clear, consistent, mandatory labelling.
11. Labelling, information, and ready access to alternatives are the three essential elements of consumers’ right to choose. Consumers and farmers must have access to non-GM food alternatives.
12. The federal government must establish and enforce strict and effective segregation programs for cropping, transportation, storage, and marketing of GM crops.
13. No GM crops, livestock, or food products should be licensed or introduced until major domestic and international customers have indicated their acceptance.

Health effects

14. Food—genetically-modified and non-modified alike—must be adequately tested, regulated, and inspected. These critical tasks must be performed by a sufficient number of adequately-funded, independent, publicly-paid inspectors.
15. Independent scientists at publicly-funded and operated labs under the jurisdiction of the Federal Minister of Health must conduct exhaustive long-term human health testing on GM foods. The assumption that GM foods are "substantially equivalent" to their non-GM analogs is unproven.
16. The Precautionary Principle must be the basis for assessing the human health effects of GM food. Where human health and safety are concerned, mere "risk assessment" is not acceptable.

Environmental effects

17. Prior to environmental release, GM seeds, animals, and organisms must be subject to environmental assessment. The Precautionary Principle must form the basis for assessing environmental effects.
18. Given that the negative environmental effects of GM crops—super-weeds, displacement of species, destruction of habitat, loss of genetic diversity—may be huge, and that the existence and magnitude of these effects are largely unknown, the Precautionary Principle clearly indicates that we should not introduce GM plants, livestock, or other organisms into our biosphere.

—Passed at the 31st annual National Convention of the National Farmers Union, November 29th-December 2nd, 2000.