

GM Alfalfa in Canada: Update on “unconfined release status”

-by Katherine Rothermel, NFU Member, Local 316

NFU Region 3 (Ontario) held its Fall Convention Nov 27th in Stratford, home of the internationally acclaimed Shakespeare Festival. The city of 30,000 is surrounded by some of the finest farmland in Canada. Our guest speakers were Dr. Rene Van Acker from the University of Guelph, Department of Plant Agriculture, and Phil Woodhouse, President of Local 344, Grey County.

Dr. Van Acker’s research interests include weed biology and ecology, robust cropping systems, multifunctional agriculture and the co-existence of GM and non-GM crops. He testified in the Schmeiser vs Monsanto case in 1998, and personally concluded that this case was not about agronomy but instead about power, control and inadequate legislation.

What Monsanto Wants

GM alfalfa has been granted “unconfined release status” in Canada. Phil Woodhouse, an organic farmer from Grey County, spoke about the Canadian Seed Trade Association’s Co-existence Workshop in Kitchener on Oct 24. Grey County, incidentally, is the largest hay-producing area in Ontario, but 85% of the alfalfa is grown with grass in mixed stands.

Forage Genetics International (FGI), the company bringing the seed to market, and Monsanto, owner of the genetic traits, want to sell this new product to farmers who grow clean stands of alfalfa, and are mainly targeting dairy farmers. The companies are also developing a GM alfalfa variety with low-fibre at mid-bloom and the quality usually associated with bud stage. To facilitate uptake of their product, FGI and Monsanto have offered to establish co-existence guidelines using space and time buffers (i.e. cut stands before flowering). Designated growing regions for GM have also been proposed. They also want acceptance of low-level thresholds of contamination with segregated markets. Low level presence (LLP) would permit a bulk load with a tenth of a per cent GM presence to be treated as if it were uncontaminated. If it is passed, Canada would be the first country to allow LLP, but the government intends to persuade trading partners to enact similar legislation and thus allow importation of contaminated grains.

Why Farmers Should Not Grow GM Alfalfa

Organic flax with .01% GM contamination was rejected by Europe. Why would it be any different for alfalfa? The Schmeiser case demonstrated that possession of patented seed is grounds for legal action with no consideration of proportionality. Monsanto only has to show that some seeds or plants in a crop contain their patented gene to evoke patent rights. As Dr. Van Acker pointed out, the law should in fact consider the proportion of patented seed in the field. There is no advantage to a farmer to have a field with a small portion of GM seed, and there is no way to know which seeds or plants are GM and which are not. If the mixed-seed field was grown out and sprayed with glyphosate, most of the crop would die. Small percentages of GMOs found in seeds or fields should be treated in law as genetic pollution.

Dr. Van Acker also pointed out that Monsanto has no liability for future interpretations of harm from their products. Growing evidence suggests that glyphosate is being overused, that it affects animal and soil health, and contaminates ground water.

In a discussion following the presentations, the Chair asked attendees for ideas about how to fight the sale of GM alfalfa. Suggestions included the following:

- Support for public plant-breeding programs;
- Support for legislation that punishes genetic polluters;
- Form alliances with consumers, CFFO, First Nations, faith groups, beekeepers, seed companies, chefs, Quebec dairy farmers, or anyone else who may be held liable in the future for the deleterious effects of GM crops;
- Support long-term studies of the effects of eating GMOs; and
- Work with cities, regions and municipalities to declare GM-free zones similar to what Salt Spring Island and in Richmond City have in place.

Dr. Van Acker’s most disturbing comment was that all escapes from “regulated events” were caused by human error. ***There is no way to stop GMO contamination once it is released.*** Let’s work together to continue to raise awareness among farm and city communities of the danger of long-term effects from using GM crops.

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