

Briefing to Members of Parliament

February 2011

Genetically Engineered Organisms: The Need to Support Bill C-474 & Know the Economic Risk to Export Markets



Summary of Bill C-474

Bill C-474 is a one-line Private Members Bill, introduced by Alex Atamanenko NDP Agriculture Critic and MP for British Columbia Southern Interior, currently before the House of Commons and **scheduled for final debate in third reading on February 8th 2011, with a final vote on February 9th.**

Bill C-474 would require that “an analysis of potential harm to export markets be conducted before the sale of any new genetically engineered seed is permitted.”

The Bill is a response to the fact that the introduction of certain genetically engineered (GE) organisms can put Canada’s export markets at risk but that current regulation does not consider this question of potential negative economic impacts.

Kelvin Einarson, director and secretary treasurer of the Manitoba Forage Seed Association, told Agriculture Committee hearings on June 7 2010: *“Bill C-474 is the first step in offering some protection in the future for Canadian family farms. Market acceptance must be made part of the evaluation process and incorporated into the Seeds Regulation Act.”*

Introduction

Bill C-474 is important because the introduction of **some new genetically engineered crops can cause economic hardship to farmers.** It is imperative that the government assess the possible impact on our export markets of introducing new GE seeds, such as GE alfalfa and GE wheat. Bill C-474 would simply require that federal government conduct such an economic analysis.

Canadian exports are at risk when Canada approves genetically engineered organisms that are not also approved in our export markets. GE contamination can shut down our markets, as seen in 2009 with GE contamination of our flax exports to 36 countries. The risks of contamination and the associated financial costs of testing and recalls can dissuade international customers from buying Canadian products in favour of guaranteed GE-free sources from other countries.

It is the government’s responsibility to protect Canadian farmers from predictable problems caused by the introduction of new GE crops. Bill C-474 would help our government meet this responsibility.

Genetic Engineering in Canada

The first genetically engineered (also called genetically modified or GM) crop – a herbicide tolerant canola – was approved in 1995. Four GE crops are currently grown in Canada: soy, canola, corn, sugarbeet (white sugarbeet for sugar processing). These are engineered for herbicide tolerance and/or insect resistance.

The Economic Threat of GE Alfalfa

The introduction of Monsanto's GE herbicide tolerant (Roundup Ready) alfalfa would have serious negative impacts on many different types of farmers and farming systems in Canada, both conventional and organic.

Without Bill C-474, there is no mechanism to even ask the question of what the economic cost of introducing GE alfalfa will be.

Alfalfa is the most important forage crop in Canada, and a significant seed crop. By area, alfalfa is the third largest crop in Canada, with 4.5 million hectares in production. Canada's alfalfa processing industry is one of the world's five largest exporters of alfalfa pellets and cubes.

Alfalfa is a perennial crop pollinated by bees and other insects. These and other characteristics mean that the GE contamination of alfalfa is inevitable.

- The GE contamination of alfalfa will have negative economic impacts on a wide range of farmers, both conventional and organic, including dairy, livestock, honey, grain, alfalfa seed and sprout growers, alfalfa growers, and processors of alfalfa pellets and cubes.
- Canadian alfalfa growers, both conventional and organic, will lose contracts with companies based in Europe and elsewhere, including Japan.
- In addition to testing and other financial burdens, farmers will bear the costs of trying to compensate for the loss of the irreplaceable perennial crop of alfalfa, with its many unique characteristics including those for soil building and high protein animal feed.
- GE alfalfa threatens the future of the entire organic food and farming system in North America.

2009 GE Flax Contamination Crisis

Farmers are at risk when GE crops are commercialized in Canada without also being approved in our major export markets. Flax farmers in Canada are still paying the price for unwanted GE contamination. Flax farmers foresaw that GE contamination would close their export markets and so, in 2001, successfully fought to get GE flax taken off the Canadian market. In late 2009, however, contamination was discovered and shut down our flax export markets. Contamination was reported in 36 countries, none of which had approved the GE flax for human consumption or environmental release.

International Precedence:

Argentina, the world's 3rd largest GE crop growing area after the US and Brazil (India is 4th and Canada is 5th) assesses the potential for negative harm on exports: "In addition to the environmental biosafety assessment, a GMO release also requires a favourable food safety assessment...**and the assessment of the absence of negative impacts on our exports.**" (From the Government of Argentina, Revised National Biosafety Framework 2004, pages 49-50.)

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