

Definitive Global Rejection of Genetically Engineered Wheat

Statement of Australian, Canadian and US Farmer, Environmental and Consumer Organizations

June 1, 2009

Summary Statement:

In light of our existing experience with genetic engineering, and recognizing the global consumer rejection of genetically engineered wheat, we restate our definitive opposition to GE wheat and our commitment to stopping the commercialization of GE traits in our wheat crops. We are committed to working with farmers, civil society groups and Indigenous peoples across the globe as we travel the road towards global food sovereignty.

Statement in Full:

In the interest of reiterating the decisive global rejection of genetically engineered (GE) wheat, culminating in Monsanto's 2004 withdrawal of requests to the Canadian and U.S. governments for commercialization of their GE wheat; and in the interest of laying to rest the attempts by Monsanto and other biotechnology corporations to introduce genetically engineered wheat, the undersigned organizations issue the following joint statement:

1. Wheat is an ancient grain that is vital for meeting the nutritional needs of many societies and has deep religious significance in many cultures. Wheat is one of three staple crop plants (the other two are rice and maize) that account for two-thirds of the diet of the world's population. Over centuries of cultivation, farmers have developed a tremendous diversity of wheat varieties, many of which are adapted to the soil and climate conditions of certain regions of the world. These locally-bred varieties are critical to ensuring local food supplies during times of weather-related disasters. In Australia, Canada, and the US, farmers and public scientists have worked collectively with this diversity to develop varieties adapted to local conditions and suited to relevant markets. Multinational seed companies have played an insignificant role in fundamental wheat seed development in these countries or anywhere else in the world.
2. The remarkable achievements in wheat breeding that farmers and scientists have managed over generations have not involved genetic engineering or patenting. While farmers and conventional breeders continue to lead the way in innovation with wheat, there are currently no genetically engineered traits in the pipeline for wheat that promise basic agronomic improvements. In reality, the only GE trait in wheat for which approval has been sought is for tolerance to the herbicide glyphosate. This trait is not designed to increase yields, but to simplify herbicide application. Not only does this technology contribute nothing to feeding the world, genetic engineering is a direct threat to global food security. Genetic engineering can and does lead to contamination of seed varieties, and poses a decisive threat to organic farming and the production of crop varieties bred specifically for local conditions. Moreover, the introduction of GE wheat would put the wheat seed supply in the hands of a small number of multinational corporations, as has happened with the introduction of GE

soybeans, GE corn and GE canola. During the recent food crisis, these companies used their oligopolistic positions to dramatically increase the price of seeds and agrochemicals. Farmers planting wheat in the Australia, Canada and the US were less affected by these price increases because they were free to save seeds and had access to public varieties. Monsanto, the world's largest producer of GE seeds, increased its profits by 120% in 2008. It should also be noted that since the introduction of GE crops in 1996, the number of people going hungry in the world has ballooned from an estimated 800 million to over 1 billion.

3. Rather than the area of wheat production decreasing due to competition from GE crops, a March 2009 Statistics Canada survey of farmers in western Canada found that farmers plan to increase acreage of wheat, barley and peas, crops for which there are no GE varieties and where plant breeding is primarily in the public sector. The survey also revealed that farmers intend to cut back on acres planted to canola seed, which is mainly GE in Canada, in order to decrease production costs. Additionally, there is no evidence to substantiate the claim that GE crop varieties increase yields.

4. Plant breeders and farmers have for too long narrowly focused on economies of scale and higher yields. This has resulted in higher input costs and lower net income for farmers. Higher yields have come at a high cost economically, as well as environmentally, because high yielding crops tend to require more fertilizers and chemical inputs. Improved crop quality is more likely than bigger yields to provide higher realized net incomes for farmers. Higher quality wheat can be achieved efficiently and accessibly through conventional plant breeding, and this is where support for research needs to be located.

5. Genetic engineering is a highly imprecise technology. GE crops are inadequately regulated by governments that rely on corporate data rather than public, peer reviewed science. Complex questions relating to the effects of GE crops on soil health, non-target insects, and human health remain understudied. Over 10 years of experience with GE crops has exposed a convincing record of high levels of irreversible contamination and corporate control over seeds as well as continued scientific uncertainty. Additionally, research from wheat organizations (Canadian Wheat Board and Australian Wheat Board) has indicated very strong market rejection of GE wheat. Commercial GE crops have so far been limited to crops used primarily for feed, oil and fibre and have thus not been subjected to national labelling requirements in many countries. GE wheat, however, would primarily be used for human consumption and food products derived from GE wheat would be labelled as GE in many countries across the world. Additionally, if GE wheat is released commercially, contamination would be inevitable and markets would view all wheat produced from these areas as GE unless proven to be non-GE. Farmers growing GE wheat will take on all of the responsibilities, costs and liabilities, with little available legal recourse to recover their losses.

6. Private seed companies are not investing in wheat research because of competition from strong public plant breeding programs and the desire and capacity of farmers to save wheat seeds from year to year. The main reason why seed companies want to introduce GE wheat is so that, by means of gene patents, they can stop farmers from saving seeds. The introduction of patents into wheat breeding will destroy the collective heritage of plant breeding for wheat and erode the strong public breeding programmes for wheat in the Canada, Australia and the US which have always generated impressive returns through minimal public investments

and/or farmer contributions. Additionally, in February 2009, 26 top US corn scientists sent a statement to the US Environmental Protection Agency asserting that independent research is being thwarted by industry technology/stewardship agreements.

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Signed By:

National Farmers Union, Canada
Canadian Biotechnology Action Network
Union Paysanne, Canada
Union Biologique Paysanne, Canada
Réseau Québécois contre les OGM, Canada
Saskatchewan Organic Directorate, Canada
Network of Concerned Farmers, Australia
Organic Federation of Australia
Biological Farmers of Australia
Gene Ethics, Australia
Greenpeace
National Family Farm Coalition, USA
Western Organization of Resource Councils, USA
Center for Food Safety, USA
Organic Consumers Association, USA

*Groups across the world are asked to sign on to this statement at www.cban.ca/globalstopGEwheat Deadline: August 31, 2009.

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Note: The above is a response to the May 14, 2009 "Wheat Biotechnology Statement" in which some industry groups from Australia, Canada and the U.S. pledge their committment to synchronized commercialization of biotechnology in wheat based on 6 claims that genetic engineering has a proven safety record and GE wheat will: feed the world, provide agronomic benefits, increase yield, increase global wheat production, and improve opportunities for private research. The full industry statement can be viewed at www.cban.ca/wheat