

Backgrounder on Bill C-474

To assess the potential harm to our export markets before a new genetically engineered seed is permitted

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Bill C-474

- **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.”**
- Bill C-474 is a one-line Private Members Bill, introduced by Alex Atamanenko NDP Agriculture Critic and MP for British Columbia Southern Interior.
- The Bill is currently before the House of Commons in its third and final reading with a **final debate on February 8th 2011 and a final vote on February 9th.**
- 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.
- Bill C-474 would simply require that federal government conduct such an economic analysis.

Why Bill C-474?

- Bill C-474 is important because the introduction of **some new genetically engineered crops can cause economic hardship to farmers.**
- 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.

Bill C-474 Hearings Shut Down

- The House of Commons Agriculture and Agri-Food Committee held hearings on Bill C-474 in 2010 but on October 27 2010 a procedural motion to extend the hearings was defeated. The motion was defeated 134 yea, 139 nay because many Liberals were not in the House to vote, including Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff.

- Instead of continuing Bill C-474 hearings, the Liberals and Conservatives put forward a motion to start new hearings on the biotech industry: "That the Standing Committee on Agriculture & Agri-food conduct a study on the status of the Canadian biotechnology sector, in which it travels to the universities across Canada where this technology is primarily being undertaken, and that it recommend, where necessary, legislative, policy and regulatory changes in order to foster an innovative and fertile biotechnology industry in Canada."
- Because of this new study, Members of the Agriculture Committee are traveling February 7-11 and will consequently **not be in the House on February 8th to participate in the debate on Bill C-474 and will not be present for the final vote on February 9th.**
- Members of the Agriculture Committee are at the University of Guelph on February 9th and hear from the President of Monsanto, among other witnesses.
- On December 2, 2010, the New Democratic Party secured a debate of up to 5 hours for Bill C-474 on February 8th 2011. This type of debate on genetic engineering in the House of Commons has never happened before.

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.

GE Alfalfa and Bill C-474

- Monsanto's GE herbicide tolerant (Roundup Ready) alfalfa could be allowed onto the Canadian seed market soon. It has already been approved for health and environmental safety but needs variety registration before it can legally be sold as seed in Canada. The USDA announced approval for planting of GE alfalfa on January 27th 2011.
- 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.
- **Without Bill C-474, there is no mechanism to even ask the question of what the economic cost of introducing GE alfalfa will be.**

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.)