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GM Wheat Opposed by W. Canadian Growers

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Report Highlights:

Wheat producers in Canada's three Prairie Provinces, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba appear unified in their opposition to the introduction of genetically modified (GM) wheat in their fields and/or markets. According to one industry official, there is more consensus among producers in Western Canada over this issue than over any other in recent memory. This opposition will likely not become manifest in provincial or federal legislation as a ban on planting GM wheat (such as that proposed recently in North Dakota House Bill 1338) since the Canadian Wheat Board, which holds a monopsony on Canadian wheat for human consumption and monopoly for export has already adopted a policy that it will not accept GM wheat.

Includes PSD changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
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PRODUCERS OPPOSED TO GENETICALLY MODIFIED WHEAT

Producers Not Keen on GM Wheat

The Canadian Wheat Board (CWB), which holds a monopsony on Canadian wheat for human consumption and monopoly for export, has a policy that states that genetically modified (GM) wheat should not be registered, (i.e., grown) unless there is market acceptance or it can be economically and effectively identified and segregated from other varieties. In addition, however, producer groups are becoming more vocal in their opposition to GM wheat. During a March 15 CWB meeting in Carnduff (a farming community in southern Saskatchewan), about 100 producers reportedly introduced a resolution stating their concerns about GM wheat testing and planting noting that the introduction of GM wheat would have a major negative effect on Canada's reputation as well as on farmers' bottom line.

More recently, at an April 10 panel discussion in Winnipeg, Manitoba on "Roundup Ready Wheat", the vice chair for the Western Grains Research Foundation (WGRF) stressed to some 60 members of Manitoba's Institute of Agrologists that there is more consensus among farmers in Western Canada over their opposition to GM wheat "than over any other issue for some time". Monsanto has supposedly been criticized for the company's testing program for GM wheat.

A senior official with Sparks Companies in Winnipeg (a U.S.-based Agriculture consulting company) confirmed the existence of opposition to GM wheat "all along the chain" from producers to grain companies and export customers. In fact, according to Sparks Canada, many in the industry believe they may have made a mistake by their early adoption of GM canola (the Canola Council of Canada noted that in 1999, 55% of the canola crop was GM and that this percentage had not changed for 2000; other estimates in the industry are as high as 65- 70%) and producers fear they may make the same mistake with wheat.

GM Wheat Moratorium Unlikely

Notwithstanding producer and processor concerns, provincial agriculture officials in the prairies feel that they could not introduce legislation to dictate a moratorium on GM wheat production such as that recently seen in North Dakota's House Bill 1338 (since modified to call for a panel to review impact and safety of GM food products). Such legislation would have an impact on international trade, and thus, the provinces must defer to the federal government in this regard.

Nevertheless there are "clusters" of producers who are banding together to further express their opposition to GM wheat, as evidenced by the Carnduff, Saskatchewan producers and their resolution. Should this type of momentum continue to build across the prairies, some observers believe that provincial officials may be pressured by producers to approach the Government of Canada (GOC) to introduce legislation, possibly including a planting moratorium, on GM wheat.

Comment

It is of interest to note that there is an apparent rift between Canadian wheat growers and growers of oilseeds, namely canola and soybeans, and corn. Oilseed and corn growers are using GM seed derived from recombinant DNA (rDNA) technologies, while wheat growers use seeds that have

been derived from non-rDNA biotechnology techniques such as accelerated mutagenesis. As the rDNA techniques are being targetted by environmental groups, wheat growers, in order to avoid consumer backlash, are looking to ensure that rDNA wheat is not certified in Canada

It is very unlikely that provinces (or the federal government) would move to force a moratorium on GM wheat planting such as that articulated recently in North Dakota. While Monsanto is expected to conduct field trials of Roundup Ready wheat (derived from rDNA technology) in the U.S. and Canada this planting season, this could serve to focus producer concerns about GM wheat and generate pressure on federal and provincial governments to take some, as yet undefined, action. The CWB's policy on not registering GM wheat until there is consumer acceptance will most likely counter any western Canadian pressure for legislation against GM wheat.

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