

Jodi Koberinski, Organic Council of Ontario

Thanks so much. I appreciate the time to speak with you all. I was just outside with the folks who are protesting across the street and getting some feedback. There were certainly a number of farmers. I counted ten, just out of the folks that I knew out of about 70 or 80 people, who are actively farming right now. Those farmers have some real deep concerns. Some of them were brought up earlier in the day by Marty Betcher and I think the biggest concern that they have is the lack of willingness to think in farm scale and farm time in all of these GE conversations, and I'll get specific back to the Roundup Ready alfalfa, but if you'll just indulge me for a moment.

Just this idea of thinking: "Well we've looked at this, at the gene flow for a whole ten years and we know something of what's going on and we can assure that this is a safe thing to do." But as Marty said, farm systems need to think in terms of 100, 200 and 300 years. We need to be thinking about our future soil health and soil biodiversity, and we really need to take more seriously than we have in the last 30 years, the issue of seed biodiversity. We have lost more seed varieties in the last 20 or 30 years than is even imaginable when we started to de-fund publicly our seed banks.

We've seen a real wholesale change in the last 30 to 40 years in not just our regulatory approach but our farm community approach to this whole idea of seed. And it wasn't that long ago that seed was part of the commons. And canola is a beautiful example. This was a seed that was bred entirely through public systems using the best minds that come together when you do open source research. Like we've seen what's really improved the IT sector – we're here in Waterloo – who's IT sector has grown in large part because of the innovation that has come through open source development and not through proprietary development.

I think we've done ourselves a disservice as an agricultural community to step so far away from the basic tenets of what we do in agriculture, which is sharing that genetic material, that commons, year upon year, and where we're working together collectively in different places and different climatic zones to improve that seed not strictly as an economic function of the seed industry, but that we take it on as a public interest. So I just wanted to sort of preface.

Wondering why there are people outside there while we're in here, and we may have this conversation and we may feel like we have stakeholders at the table, there's that fundamental difference in opinion and approach to what we do in agriculture that underscores these conversations, and folks out there wanted me to bring that to you.

They also asked me to remind folks here that the starting point of "we've given up on zero. Zero is an impossibility", so we are talking about a coexistence strategy that's based on one side of the conversation accepting contamination into their seed crop and I actually had one farmer, and I'm going to get a little crass here, that said "I'd happily come in and pee into the water of someone who's talking. It's only a few drops of pee in your water, so why are you being concerned?"

It's a funny example but it's that basic for farm folks. Why should anyone tell this farmer that she has to accept a certain amount of GE contamination in her alfalfa seed? It's an unreasonable place to start from when we're talking about the agricultural community who has a different approach to agriculture than the dominant approach.

And I think that's the other thing that I wanted to bring forward as the Organic Council to the folks in the room. We have invested all of our eggs in one genetic modification basket here and any of us who pays attention to the concept of resiliency knows that you have to have several of similar things that are going on in evolution if you're going to come out with something good on the other side.

And if we are going to restrict our capacity to improve seed outside of this genetic modification option – none of us, more than me wants to you folks who believe in biotech as an answer to be right. I really want you to be right, because if you're wrong, the stakes are really, really high. This is nothing we can call back if we get information in the future, and so what I would like to urge is that we are moving as slowly and as carefully as possible in all areas of GE approval. What is the rush to commercialization? What is the huge agronomic problem that this is the solution to that we don't have other options on the table? I think until all other options are exhausted, we need to move forward as cautiously as we can muster because this dealing with this in the perennial world as opposed to annual crops, we do not have the capacity to call this back if information comes down the line.

And when I hear that this is a product that's been approved by our government, I will remind you that DDT is a product that was also approved by this government and we can come up with a litany of other chemicals and pharmaceutical drugs that we've approved in the past and information then comes to light in the future and tells us that you know things aren't as rosy as we had once imagined.

So I continue to come to these meetings and meet with you folks. I look around this room and I see a lot of people who care passionately about farmers, who care passionately about agriculture and I don't think for one minute that there is anyone sitting here in this room who is setting out to do some bad thing. But what I am aware of is that there is a lack of awareness that this is a perspective that is being shared and not how things are. It is not how things are that we have monoculture agriculture or that we are reliant on the tools that we have today.

Forty years ago none of us in this room would have realized that we are as reliant as we are in agriculture on the tools that we have now and I'm going to tell you that in another 30 or 40 years, none of this room are going to know what the dominant agriculture looks like. But I can assure you that it's not going to look as it does today and we need to keep our options open moving forward so that however it does look, we haven't restricted our genetic pool to the point where now the genie is out of the bag and we can't put it back in.

I appreciate you putting up with a bit more of a philosophical conversation from me. I would be happy to continue this conversation with anybody either here or outside of this particular context. You know we certainly want to keep moving things forward and are committed to reaching consensus with our brothers and sisters in agriculture.

