

Kelvin Einarson, Forage Seeds Canada

Good afternoon. My name is Kelvin Einarson, and I'm a forage seed grower from Manitoba and former hay exporter. I'm here today representing Forage Seed Canada. Forage Seed Canada is an incorporated, not-for-profit producer driven organization representing forage seed growers in Canada. It's a national voice representing forage and legume seed producers in developing and communicating policy and concerns relating to the forage seed industry.

We realize that this workshop today is to develop coexistence plans for alfalfa hay production and not seed production, but we cannot ignore the fact that there is a large forage seed production sector within Canadian agriculture.

Forage Seeds Canada is deeply concerned with the possible introduction of Roundup Ready Alfalfa into Canada and the implications it will have for Canadian forage seed producers. According to data compiled by David Wong of Alberta Agriculture over the last five years, Canadian forage seed exports have averaged over 50 million kilograms annually. As a significant percentage of these exports is destined for the European market and other markets that have an absolute zero tolerance to adventitious presence of any GE crop, the introduction of Roundup Ready Alfalfa will cause some serious problems in marketing and exporting of Canadian forage seed. Inevitably, markets will be lost to Canadian producers because it will be impossible to maintain seed purity.

Experience in other crops where GE technology has been introduced has shown that technology does not stay confined to the field where the crop production is coming from, and with the release of Roundup Ready Alfalfa, Canadian forage seed exports will be at risk due to seed contamination, which will happen in one of two ways: It is inevitable that once Roundup Ready alfalfa is introduced into the environment, there will be DNA transfer from Roundup Ready Alfalfa to conventional alfalfa or non-Roundup Ready Alfalfa plants.

Although it's a greater risk in seed production, in the case of alfalfa hay production, regardless of the precautions taken by growers, there will always be some plants that bloom prior to harvest or escape harvest altogether.

Because alfalfa is widely grown, and feral populations do exist in ditches, pastures and headlands, cross pollination via honey bees, leafcutter bees and native pollinators poses a significant threat. In addition to gene transfer, contamination can also occur by physical seed contamination simply by mixing of seed.

Coexistence between genetically engineered or herbicide tolerant varieties and conventional varieties will be impossible even with the most stringent and sound agronomic practices. Once our seed stocks are contaminated with GE traits, how do we ensure that our hay fields are not contaminated?

Forage Seeds Canada is not opposed to the use of biotechnology in forage seed, however technology must be based on sound science and, more importantly, must be accepted by the markets that we are selling into.

As an exporting nation, Canada must produce the quality of seed or products that our customers require and demand, and I'd just like to emphasize that in Canada here we export probably 80% of what we produce versus the U.S. where they export, I don't know, probably only perhaps 20%, so the export market to Canadian producers is really significant.

As mentioned early in respect to genetically modified seed, many of Canada's export markets have a zero tolerance policy and zero tolerance means zero tolerance. It does not mean that there is tolerance for low level contamination.

In an article in the Western Producer on May 7, 2010, Trish Jordan, a spokesperson for Monsanto Canada said – and I quote: “Monsanto has worked closely with alfalfa seed and forage industry groups to ensure the risks of gene escape and market damage are minimized.” End of quote. The key here is the word “minimized” instead of “eliminated”. We are firmly convinced that this is because there is absolutely no way to eliminate gene escapes. Gene escapes have occurred in the past and will continue to occur in the future. That is inevitable.

If we can keep Canadian forages free of GE traits we have an opportunity to expand our market share rather than having markets eliminated because we cannot guarantee the purity.

Perhaps instead of a workshop on coexistence, the Canadian Seed Trade Association should look at a workshop on how we keep forages GM free in Canada until such time as these traits are accepted in our markets.