

Briefing to Members of Parliament

October 29, 2009

Genetically Modified Flax Contamination: Canadian Farmers Lose their European Market



Summary:

GM flax contamination has been found in Canadian flax exports to Europe, leading to widespread product recalls in Europe, quarantined shipments of flax from Canada, and a loss in prices for Canadian flax farmers. The European market is currently closed to Canadian flax.

Background:

European authorities have identified the GM flax as "Triffid" (developed at the University of Saskatchewan) as the source of contamination, but the Canadian flax industry is waiting for a new test to be developed before they confirm the source.

While "Triffid" GM flax has been approved by the CFIA and Health Canada for planting and eating in Canada, the GM flax was deregistered in 2001 by the CFIA, making it illegal to sell the seeds. GM flax has not been approved outside of North America.

The GM flax was deregistered by the CFIA in 2001 on the request of the Flax Council of Canada and Saskatchewan Flax Development Commission as it was clear to them that the European flax market would be destroyed if GM contamination were to occur. Flax is one of the crops that requires variety registration prior to commercialization, so deregistration would keep GM Triffid flax off the market. All existing stocks of Triffid were supposed to be destroyed following deregistration.

As a result of the reported GM contamination, flax prices for Canadian farmers have plummeted. 60% of Canada's flax exports go to Europe each year, but this market is now closed.

Update:

- As of October 29, contaminated flax has been distributed to 34 countries.

Unanswered Questions:

- What are the CFIA and Minister of Agriculture doing to help Canadian flax farmers?
- Who will pay for ridding Canadian seed supplies of GM contamination, and ensuring that future flax crops are not contaminated? Who is liable?
- What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that this type of contamination crisis does not happen to Canadian farmers again, with other GM crops?

Actions Required:

1. CFIA regulatory approval for environmental release of GM crops must include social and economic considerations such as potential market harm.
2. There must be an appeals process, open to the public, for GM crop approvals.
3. The entire regulatory system for GM crops requires full review in order to assess these and other recommendations including the 58 recommendations of the 2001 Royal Society Expert Panel on the Future of Food Biotechnology.

This briefing may be found at www.cban.ca/flax

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