

GM, not Bill C-474, a risk to industry

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Sharratt<info@cban.ca><p>Opinion, Western Producer, March 25, 2010
Lucy Sharratt, coordinator for the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network, provides another view on GM bill proposal</p><p>Bill C-

474 is not, as Rick White of the Canadian Canola Growers Association argued in this space March 18, a significant threat to the future competitiveness of our industry. The issue here is not the future of canola but of other crops that don't incorporate genetically modified traits. The threat to competitiveness in these other industries comes from GM crops themselves if we don't start considering the reality in our export markets.</p><p>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. The bill responds to the fact that if GM crops are commercially released in Canada but are not also approved for safety in our export markets, farmers will lose those markets. The global reality is that GM is controversial. This controversy is not going away and directly impacts the state of our export markets. The controversy over GM translates into the undeniable fact that applying GM technology to some crops can severely damage those industries. We have the unfortunate evidence of Canadian flax.</p><p>In last week's House of Commons debate over Bill C-

474, sponsor Alex Atamanenko, an NDP MP, spoke to the fact that GM flax was taken off the market at the behest of flax farmers precisely to protect export markets. But Conservative MP and agriculture committee member David Anderson accused Atamanenko of misleading farmers and Canadians with his description of the flax crisis and said, "I think he is doing that in order to scare the farm community." Both the Liberals and Conservatives argued that the bill would not have saved the flax industry. They seem to be basing his conclusion on incorrect information that GM flax was never approved for sale in Canada, as stated by MP Francis Valeriote in a March 17 debate. But Triffid was approved, first for human consumption and then for commercial release via variety registration. Triffid was deregistered in 2001. It was deregistered for the express purpose of protecting Canada's major flax export market of Europe. The fact that the GM flax was deregistered before farmers had a chance to grow the crop is a moot point. The fact remains that farmers were reproducing the GM flax, 200,000 bushels of which were crushed in 2001, for the market because Triffid was commercially approved and this commercial approval resulted in widespread contamination that has damaged flax export markets. Ten years ago, flax farmers had the foresight to know that GM flax would ruin their largest export market. Should we not ask the government to include this question before approving GM traits in other crops? Canola is not at risk here. Canola is arguably not even relevant to this question. The canola industry does not need to worry about the outcome of market assessments because as Whites says, the Canadian canola industry has been able to double exports in the last decade. The fact is that some farmers, wheat and alfalfa growers, for example, have a lot to lose from the introduction of GM traits. What government in the world will risk their farmers being swept away by inappropriately applied GM technology? Last week, David Anderson called this bill an anti-

farmer, but it seems to me that introducing GM crops that will destroy export markets is an anti-farmer. The CCGA argues that Bill C-

474 would introduce subjective criteria into the seed variety approval process. However, surveying export market acceptance for GM wheat, for example, is not a subjective exercise. Nor is listing the regulatory status of GM crops in other countries. Allowing the commercial release of GM crops that we know will close or damage our export markets undermines all other attempts to preserve and expand our markets. The CCGA may encourage industry and government to work together to develop international low-level presence policies but this is wishful thinking rather than an actionable plan. Zero tolerance is a scientific decision that would be extremely hard for any country to justify overturning. If Canadian farmers foresee an economic disaster with the introduction of a GM crop, then the government should have a mechanism available to address that before farmers are left to deal with the fallout. It's not too late for the federal government to respond to the flax crisis by making sure this scenario is not repeated in other crops. It is only responsible that MPs support Bill C-

474 for farmers and for Canada's economy. We should all urge our MPs to support this bill.</p>