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## **Do Not Let our Nightmare Become Yours, Warns Canadian Farmers**

*The Soil Association launched on 17 September 2002 a damning report on GM crops, calling them a 'practical and economic disaster'. But the most eloquent opposition came from North American farmers themselves. As Britain gears up for the public debate on GM crops this autumn, it would be wise to look at the lessons learnt from the North American experience. Lim Li Ching reports.*

Since GM crops were introduced commercially to North America six years ago, the biotechnology industry has consistently painted this as a picture of unqualified success. Yet, a new report published by the Soil Association, *Seeds of doubt: North American farmers' experiences of GM crops*, shows that GM food crops are far from a success story. The report draws on interviews with farmers about their experiences of GM soya, maize and oilseed rape, and reviews some of the independent research.

Speaking at the launch of the report, Lord Peter Melchett, Policy Director of the Soil Association, set the North American GM crop experience in the context of the impending decision on whether to allow commercial growing of GM crops in the UK. Particularly so when "it's a time of tragedy for farming", and when UK farmers are told that the new technology could save the industry.

However, Melchett cautioned against wholesale acceptance of this assertion, as the report shows that there are negative outcomes with GM crops, such as lower yields, more or at best similar amount of chemical sprays, and reduced profits.

The claims of increased yields have not been realised overall except for a small increase in Bt maize yields. But the main GM variety (Roundup Ready soya) yields 6-11% less than non-GM varieties. The report also found that GM herbicide tolerant crops have made farmers more reliant on herbicides and new weed problems have emerged. Rogue GM oilseed rape plants (volunteers) are now a widespread problem in Canada.

Furthermore, the profitability of growing GM herbicide tolerant soya and insect resistant Bt maize is less than non-GM crops, due to the extra cost of GM seed and lower market prices. The report estimates that GM soybeans, maize and oilseed rape have cost the US economy at least \$12 billion (£8 billion) since 1999 in farm subsidies, lower crop prices, loss of major export markets and product recalls due to widespread contamination. Almost the entire \$300 million annual US maize exports to the EU and the \$300 million annual Canadian oilseed rape exports to the EU have disappeared, and the US share of the world soya market has decreased.

The report also says that widespread GM contamination has occurred rapidly, resulting in the loss of nearly the whole organic oilseed rape sector in

Saskatchewan, at a potential cost of millions of dollars. As such, non-GM farmers are finding it very hard or impossible to grow GM-free crops.

Rodney Nelson, a conventional farmer from North Dakota, then told his story. He was one of the first farmers in North Dakota to grow Roundup Ready soybeans. While much looking forward to the fantastic results as claimed by Monsanto, the first year of sowing in 1998 was disappointing, with poor yields. Undeterred, Nelson sowed a better Roundup Ready variety in 1999, this time on 1500 acres. Again, yields were lower than conventional soybean. And the seeds cost six times as much!

But Nelson and his family were in for a further shock. In 1999, Monsanto sent two investigators to collect samples from his fields – they suspected the Nelsons of saving patented Roundup Ready soybean seeds from the 1998 harvest for replanting in 1999. In mid-October 2000, Monsanto filed a lawsuit against the Nelsons, suing them for planting GM soya that the company claimed hadn't been paid for.

Nelson categorically denied the allegations, saying, "We did not save that seed and plant it". And he was eventually proved right when Monsanto withdrew the lawsuit. He had found that around 50% of the samples that the 'inspectors' claimed to have collected from his fields were actually not from his land. The whole Monsanto investigation was a sham. Nelson believes that his family was made a scapegoat, and that it was the company's goal "to scare farmers into not saving seed".

In the middle of the whole ordeal, Nelson's father had a heart attack. In the end, the Nelsons accepted the settlement that Monsanto offered, rather than going to trial, to avoid the traumatic process. After one and a half years of this nightmare, the Nelsons were left with attorney's fees, and Monsanto had managed to get a gagging clause imposed on them.

Nelson urged farmers in the UK to look beyond the debate on whether to commercialise GM crops and instead ask if crops should be patented by the multinational corporations, for that's what GM crops are about. He said, "God help you from the wrath of the overzealous biotech companies".

"Put a stop to this madness here!" he urged. He hoped that if the UK rejects GM crops, then the same could happen in the US to restore his rights and seed.

Theresa Podoll is an organic farmer from North Dakota, and also the Executive Director of the Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society (NPSAS), which represents 367 organic farmers. Commenting on the EU report that GM crop adoption would threaten organic farming with the loss of organic status, she said, "Our organic producers are living that nightmare".

Podoll said that the rapid adoption of GMOs in North America has more to do with the deluge of advertising and media promotion. Another contributing factor is the research partnerships between agricultural universities (land grant institutes) and

biotech corporations, whereby researchers have become promoters of GM technology.

GM wheat is the next major commercial crop slated for introduction. But many farmers are particularly worried about contamination of organic and conventional products, and the ensuing loss of markets.

Organic and conventional farmers are not taking this lying down though; in North Dakota they are campaigning hard for a moratorium on the growing of GM wheat. In 2001, they were nearly successful in getting a moratorium in place, but Monsanto, armed with persistent lobbyists, successfully persuaded the Senate not to introduce the moratorium. Monsanto had threatened to sue North Dakota for jeopardising commerce. The company also threatened to withdraw its research investment from the state.

Podoll painted a stark picture of the legal minefields associated with GM crops. Farmers who save seeds face the threat of being sued for patent infringement if contamination occurs. Contamination has also led to the rejection of produce by organic buyers. But in the technology agreement farmers have to sign with the companies, there is no performance warranty and producers have to bear any liabilities. The litigious climate in North America is increasing – the Starlink contamination case has resulted in heavy lawsuits, and Percy Schmeiser's case where patent holders' rights were upheld over farmers' rights, "puts all farmers at risk".

She closed by pleading, "Do not allow our nightmare to become yours".

In Canada, organic and conventional farmers are facing similar difficulties. Arnold Taylor, an organic farmer and President of the Saskatchewan Organic Directorate (SOD), has had to abandon growing canola (oilseed rape), with direct losses amounting to £8,000 a year.

SOD has launched a lawsuit on behalf of all organic grain farmers in the province against Monsanto and Aventis. They are seeking compensation for the economic damages caused to certified organic grain producers due to GM contamination. The spread of Aventis' Liberty Link and Monsanto's Roundup Ready canola into organic varieties has destroyed Saskatchewan's organic canola market. The group alleges that GM canola has spread across the prairies and contaminated conventional crops so extensively that most certified organic grain farmers no longer attempt to grow the organic variety.

SOD is also seeking an injunction to prevent the introduction of GM wheat into the province. Wheat is the most important grain grown by certified organic growers in Saskatchewan and their largest export. The very survival of organic agriculture in Saskatchewan is threatened if GM wheat is released. The organic farmers there have built organic agriculture with virtually no support from the government and say, "We won't stand by and watch our industry sacrificed on the altar of biotechnology".

Taylor ended with this warning, "I say to British farmers, GMOs cannot be controlled and cannot be contained. If you allow them into your system, the whole system will be contaminated".