

CANADA – Le blé transgénique non souhaité

Par Inf'OGM

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Le Bureau Canadien du blé (Canadian Wheat Board) a demandé au gouvernement de ne pas autoriser le blé transgénique de Monsanto. Son président estime que l'autorisation ne peut être acceptable qu'à deux conditions : que ce blé présente bel et bien des avantages pour les producteurs et qu'une véritable ségrégation soit opérée pour satisfaire les consommateurs. Sa position est d'ordre purement économique, puisqu'il a précisé que les pays qui achetaient à prix fort le blé canadien, comme la Grande Bretagne, l'Italie et le Japon, s'approvisionneront là où le blé n'est pas génétiquement modifié. Le bureau a même demandé que le gouvernement adopte une loi qui intégrerait dans ses procédures d'autorisation "l'acceptation du marché".

Opinion - Wheat board must be heard

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Ottawa should be paying close attention to the advice of its monopoly grain marketer that neither Prairie farmers nor their global customers are ready to accept a transgenic wheat that Monsanto wants to register for sale in Canada by 2003.

No other grain exporting nation allows the production of genetically modified wheat, not even the U.S. where Monsanto is based. While being first on the market with a new product can often be the key to success, the Canadian Wheat Board is on the mark with its assessment that Canada, as the world's second-biggest grain exporter, has much to lose if it gets ahead of its customers.

At a time when consumer confidence in global agriculture is hitting rock bottom, with alarmist talk about genetically modified foods finding a receptive audience among people concerned about mad cow disease and the recent outbreak of hoof and mouth, Canada should heed the board's call to put off registering the GM wheat variety.

The current registration system in Canada places no value on market acceptance of a grain variety, CWB chair Ken Ritter told a Commons

committee. As long a variety has good disease resistance, agronomic value and quality as its benchmark, it can be registered.

« We believe that genetically modified wheat varieties shouldn't be introduced until it can be shown that there will be clear benefits for western Canadian farmers and the Canadian handling system can segregate GM varieties to meet customer requirements, » he notes.

Rather than being one more unscientific and baseless anti-GM rant, Ritter's stance is based on a practicality that comes from a thorough knowledge of the market in which his organization operates. The reality is that consumers in Europe and Asian nations such as Japan don't want foods that have been genetically altered to withstand weed-killing chemicals.

With many of the 70 countries that now buy grain from the board refusing to accept grain with even minute traces of GM product, Ritter's position is completely rational. Customers have every right to choose what they buy and consume, even if their bias against transgenic foods is based on sheer ignorance.

The wheat board is sensible in calling for a moratorium on registering GM wheat and barley until Canada's grain handling system can efficiently and effectively identify and segregate large volumes of transgenic grains to meet customer demands. As well, the board is right to call for the food inspection agency and Canada Customs to take action to prevent importation of GM wheat and barley varieties into Canada for production until proper segregation measures are enacted.

Monsanto may argue that the government has no scientific grounds to reject registration but the board makes a sound economic case on behalf of Prairie farmers, who risk losing hundreds of millions in lost sales, why approval should be delayed.

The board and politicians should encourage research on transgenic grains because Canadian farmers stand to benefit immensely from it. However, rather than put the onus on the private sector, whose need to protect proprietary interests raises consumer concerns, more of the research needs to be done in the accessible public domain to facilitate market acceptance.

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