

## AgCan ends testing of GE wheat developed with Monsanto

By DENNIS BUECKERT

OTTAWA (CP) -- Agriculture Canada is abandoning a long-running project involving genetically engineered wheat it developed in partnership with biotech giant Monsanto, amid doubts about how well the product would sell.

Regulatory authorities continue to assess the risks and benefits of Roundup Ready wheat, but the AgCan decision suggests that scientific hopes for the first strain of biotech wheat may be dimming.

Jim Bole of Agriculture Canada said the department will make no further investment in the crop it has developed with Monsanto since 1997. "There's still some testing going on that does involve our scientists . . . but Ag Canada is not contributing more funds toward it," Bole said in an interview from Winnipeg.

"We're no longer developing Roundup Ready wheat with Monsanto." Asked if the department's decision reflects concern about whether Canada's wheat customers would accept the new strain of wheat, Bole replied: "Yes, I think it does."

The AgCan-Monsanto contract is confidential, but Bole said the company invested \$1.3 million while the department invested \$500,000. The department also gave Monsanto access to state-of-the-art genetic material developed over many years of research.

Monsanto spokeswoman Trish Jordan played down the significance of the AgCan decision to end the collaboration, saying its purpose had been achieved and there was no reason to extend it.

Jordan said Monsanto still hopes to commercialize Roundup Ready wheat, but will not do anything to jeopardize Canada's wheat markets. "Biotechnology has a lot to offer to wheat production in Western Canada and we're trying to find ways to make this doable and come up with solutions rather than just stopping all work altogether.

"Certainly as a company we're not going to do anything to jeopardize the ability of Western Canadian farmers to market their grain." Roundup Ready wheat is resistant to Roundup, a popular herbicide. It allows farmers to easily kill weeds without killing their wheat plants. But many countries have been reluctant to embrace genetically engineered foods, and there are concerns that the new wheat plants could turn into superweeds.

The Canadian Wheat Board has said most of its customers don't want the new strain and last year it asked Monsanto to withdraw its application for regulatory approval.

Bole said the Agriculture Canada scientists had learned a lot from working with Monsanto, and the collaboration seemed promising at the outset in 1997. Currently, however, "Agriculture Canada would probably no longer anticipate a return on their investment."

He said the biotech revolution in agriculture has not lived up to expectations.

"I'm afraid it was oversold. We expected to be growing crops at this time with many traits that would be of great value to consumers and producers.

"But the regulatory area has been much more stringent than anyone anticipated and market acceptance hasn't been as positive as we would have anticipated."