

National Farmers Union (May 10, 2004)
PRESS RELEASE

WIDESPREAD OPPOSITION TO ROUNDUP READY WHEAT FORCES MONSANTO TO BACK OFF

SASKATOON, SK - Widespread opposition from farm organizations, environmental groups and consumers has forced Monsanto to terminate its research and promotion of genetically-modified (GM) wheat. In a news release dated May 10, 2004, Monsanto announced it "will discontinue breeding and field level research of Roundup Ready wheat."

"This is a tremendous victory for farmers in Canada and around the world," stated Stewart Wells, President of the National Farmers Union (NFU). "Clearly, Monsanto is backing off because the opposition to genetically-modified wheat is overwhelming."

"We look forward to Monsanto's official withdrawal of GM wheat from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's approval processes," added Wells. "We also look forward to assurances that no GM wheat will be planted anywhere in Canada outside of greenhouses and that the threat of contamination and subsequent market loss will be eliminated."

NFU Vice-President Terry Boehm pointed out that not only will this victory ensure Canada preserves its traditional share of the global wheat market, it will also save farmers millions of dollars in direct agronomic costs. "The savings in both these areas amounts to approximately \$823 million annually," stated Boehm. "That is good news for financially-strapped family farmers."

In addition to the direct savings, there are other indirect benefits. Wheat production will remain a viable option for many organic farmers, who would otherwise face the possibility of their crops being contaminated by GM seeds. Consumers in both the domestic and international markets have also indicated clearly that they reject genetically-modified wheat.

Boehm warned, however, that farmers and consumers must remain vigilant on this issue. "It is worrisome that, in its press release, Monsanto leaves the door open for the introduction of wheat with other biotechnological traits besides herbicide tolerance," he said.

The NFU was instrumental in bringing to light research by Agriculture Canada scientists which proved a link exists between the use of glyphosate formulations (like Monsanto's Roundup) and increased fusarium disease in wheat. Losses from fusarium already total hundreds of millions of dollars per year, and the introduction of GM wheat may well have spread and intensified the incidence of fusarium as a result of increased glyphosate use. Monsanto had been unwilling to provide Canadian regulators with full disclosure of research on the correlation between fusarium and glyphosate use.

The opposition to GM wheat included the NFU, Saskatchewan Organic Directorate, Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities, the Canadian Wheat Board, Canadian Health Coalition, Agricultural Producers Association of Saskatchewan, Keystone Agricultural Producers, Greenpeace, the Polaris Institute and others too numerous to list. A letter signed by 220 Canadian organizations expressing opposition to GM wheat was sent to then-Prime Minister Jean Chretien on July 31, 2001. It called on the Prime Minister to "act immediately to prevent the introduction of GM wheat in Canadian food and fields."

"The vast majority of farmers and a significant portion of civil society had aligned against Monsanto and GM wheat," concluded Wells. "In some ways, it was Monsanto against 'everybody' - and 'everybody' won."

The victory echoes a similar victory in the 1990s, when Monsanto tried to introduce a genetically-modified dairy cow hormone that Canadians didn't want or need. Rural and urban citizens united to oppose Monsanto and won on that issue as well. Today, a broad coalition has recorded a similar success in turning back Monsanto's unwanted GM wheat.

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Greenpeace Canada (May 10, 2004)
Press Release

Monsanto Drops Genetically Engineered Wheat Greenpeace Declares Victory for the Environment, Farmers and Consumers

Greenpeace today declared victory for the environment with the announcement by Monsanto that they would suspend further development or open field trials of its genetically engineered, Roundup Ready wheat. Since 2001, a diverse body of groups, including the Canadian Wheat Board, the Canadian National Farmers Union, the Council of Canadians and Saskatchewan organic farmers have opposed the release of Roundup Ready wheat.

"This is a victory for the environment, farmers and consumers" said Pat Venditti, Greenpeace Genetic Engineering Campaigner. "Strong rejection of GE wheat from virtually every corner of the globe once again showed the resistance to GE foods."

Monsanto announced this morning that they will defer all further efforts to introduce Roundup Ready wheat, and that they will discontinue breeding and field level research of the crop. This follows a similar announcement from 2003 in which the company announced its withdrawal from development of pharmaceutical crops.

"Let's hope GE wheat permanently joins GE flax, GE tomatoes, and GE potatoes in the dustbin of bad ideas. Rather than having to restage this battle in four years time, we hope that Monsanto has heard loud and clear that genetically engineered wheat is a non-starter," continued Mr. Venditti. "The Canadian government should make a note of this and re-think it's devotion to this unnecessary technology."

According to the Canadian Wheat Board, eighty-seven percent of Canadian wheat buyers now require non-GE certification of wheat. In a survey of countries willing to accept GE wheat by the US Department of Agriculture, only four- Peru, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Yemen- said they would buy it.

Monsanto's announcement is available at: www.monsanto.com
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Canadian Wheat Board (May 10, 2004)
Press Release

Celebrating 25 Years of Grassroots Leadership and Action CWB says Monsanto makes "right decision" to defer roundup ready wheat

WINNIPEG -- The CWB welcomes today's announcement from Monsanto that it is deferring the North American introduction of Roundup Ready wheat, a genetically modified (GM) wheat variety that has been submitted for regulatory approval in Canada and the United States.

"Western Canadian farmers and their customers in over 70 countries around the world benefit from this announcement," said Ken Ritter, chair of the CWB's farmer-controlled board of directors. "Farmers overwhelmingly opposed the introduction of Roundup Ready wheat, which offered few agronomic benefits and threatened to destroy premium markets for their product."

Customers who bought 87 per cent of the spring wheat produced by Prairie farmers last year have said they do not want and will not buy GM wheat. At present, there is no segregation system in place to prevent mingling of GM and non-GM wheat to tolerance levels acceptable to customers.

"Monsanto has made the right decision by respecting the wishes of their customers – farmers," Ritter added, noting the announcement follows extensive lobbying from the CWB, its customers and other farmer organizations.

The CWB will continue to press for a commitment from Monsanto to withdraw its application for regulatory approval of Roundup Ready wheat that is currently before the federal government. "There is no need to continue this process for a product in which Monsanto says it will no longer invest," Ritter said.

The CWB will also continue to lobby the federal government to close the regulatory gap on GM wheat by adding a cost-benefit analysis prior to unconfined release. "We need to ensure farmers' commercial interests are protected in the regulatory process," Ritter said.

The CWB remains interested in and supportive of any biotechnology products as long as they offer a net benefit to Prairie farmers and their customers.

Controlled by western Canadian farmers, the CWB is the largest wheat and barley marketer in the world. As one of Canada's biggest exporters, the Winnipeg-based organization sells grain to more than 70 countries and returns all sales revenue, less the costs of marketing, to Prairie farmers.

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Toronto Star (May 11, 2004)

Monsanto drops modified wheat

Shelving genetically altered crop called 'business decision'
Environmentalists, farmers, consumer groups claim victory
BY DANA FLAVELLE, BUSINESS REPORTER

Environmentalists, consumers and farmers are claiming a major victory after biotech giant Monsanto Co. yesterday shelved plans to introduce the world's first genetically engineered wheat.

But the battle over the future of genetically modified food is far from over.

The pioneering multinational company said it hopes to reintroduce its latest biotech crop within four to eight years once it gains wider acceptance.

But opponents say they want governments to raise the regulatory barriers in the meantime.

"We're so excited. Wheat is such a staple. It's on everyone's dinner table. For once we saw how consumer rejection can have an impact," said Nadege Adam, a spokesperson for the Council of Canadians, an Ottawa-based consumer lobby group.

"This is a huge victory," said Pat Venditti, a spokesperson for Greenpeace Canada. "Everyone assumed Monsanto was going ahead with this."

Monsanto denied pressure groups had anything to do with its decision, saying it was a business decision. The company said it decided to defer all further efforts to introduce Roundup Ready wheat after extensive consultation with customers in the wheat industry.

The market for spring wheat has shrunk by 25 per cent since Monsanto began developing the herbicide resistant strain in 1997 as farmers switched to more profitable crops, the company noted.

The company said it plans to focus on developing new traits for genetically engineered crops that already have wide acceptance, such as corn, canola and cotton.

"The business opportunities with Roundup Ready spring wheat are less attractive relative to Monsanto's other commercial priorities," said Carl Casale, executive vice-president of the St. Louis, Mo.-based multinational.

The Canadian Wheat Board, the world's largest marketing agency for wheat and barley, was among the Monsanto customers opposed to the product.

Its members stood to lose 87 per cent of their market as a growing number of countries, including Japan and the United Kingdom, demanded assurances the genetically modified crop wouldn't contaminate conventional supplies, something current technology can't supply, board spokesperson Louise Waldman said.

Canadian farmers sell \$4 billion to \$6 billion worth of wheat and barley each year and meet 20 per cent of the world's demand.

Unlike Roundup Ready canola and corn, which lower farmers' costs by reducing their use of chemical sprays, there was no economic benefit to adopting Roundup Ready wheat, said Waldman.

Monsanto had planned to launch the modified wheat in North America, which is the world's largest exporter. But U.S. wheat farmers were meeting similar opposition from customers.

The world leader in genetically altered seeds says it could re-introduce Roundup Ready wheat within four to eight years in conjunction with other, more attractive biotech traits under development, such as drought resistance.

Canada's wheat farmers aren't opposed to genetically altered seeds, the wheat board said, but want to see more benefits and more advances in technology that allow farmers to segregate modified crops from conventional ones.

In the meantime, critics of biotech engineering say now that genetically altered wheat is no longer an imminent threat, they can devote more resources to pressing Ottawa to toughen up the approval process.

"We feel genetically engineered crops should go through the same system that's used to introduce new drugs," said Stewart Wells, president of the National Farmers Union.

"There may be a place for some traits in some plants," added Wells, an organic farmer in Swift Current, Sask. "But we need to slow down and treat each case individually."

Greenpeace wants mandatory labelling of food that contains genetically modified ingredients so that consumers can make their own choice. Surveys by the Council of Canadians show 83 per cent of consumers want a moratorium on GM food.

But a Monsanto spokesperson said its own studies show consumers aren't worried about it. "Did the actions of a few anti-biotech groups influence our decision? Absolutely not," said Monsanto Canada spokesperson Trish Jordan.

"This was a business decision based on the economics of bringing this production to market versus other crops where we have massive acceptance."

Canada's grocery retailers were reluctant to comment on the latest developments yesterday. The Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors said genetic modification had become a huge problem for European retailers. That's why it supported voluntary labelling of genetically engineered foods in Canada.

Loblaw Cos. Ltd., the country's largest supermarket chain, said it has addressed demand for GM-free food through its line of President's Choice organic products.

Monsanto said delayed development of the modified wheat would have no material effect on its earnings this year. The seed was still two to three years' away from production, even if it met all regulatory approvals, a spokesperson said later.

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Globe and Mail (May 11, 2004)

Biotech giant backs off on wheat

By HEATHER SCOFFIELD

Ottawa — Multinational biotech company Monsanto Co. has backed away from its drive to sell genetically modified wheat in Canada and the United States, prompting activists to claim victory and wheat farmers to breathe a deep sigh of relief.

Monsanto said yesterday that it will "defer" indefinitely its attempts to win government approval for Roundup Ready wheat because the business case for it was poor.

"We will discontinue all commercial programs and development programs for wheat," Monsanto Canada spokeswoman Trish Jordan said. "Possibly not for good, but we don't know that for sure."

Roundup Ready wheat, like Monsanto's other Roundup Ready products, is genetically modified to resist Monsanto herbicides, allowing farmers to spray their wheat fields without harming their crops.

The product has not been grown commercially in Canada and the United States; it was still working its way through the government approval process in both countries.

The Canadian Wheat Board has lobbied long and hard against it, arguing that the day when even one farmer is allowed to grow genetically modified wheat is the day Canadian spring wheat is shut out of most of its main export and domestic markets.

"We think this is a good result for everyone," chairman Ken Ritter said. "It finally dawned on them [Monsanto] that the only way you sell something is if you have someone who can buy it."

Losses to wheat farmers would be about \$1-billion a year at least, the wheat board estimates. Japan and Europe had already indicated they would find their wheat elsewhere if Canada allowed GM wheat, and the domestic market was not receptive either, Mr. Ritter said.

That's because it's almost impossible to distinguish GM wheat from conventional wheat, and buyers would have to assume that the product they were importing was contaminated with at least some GM wheat.

"Our buyers were saying they did not want this," Mr. Ritter said.

Activists concerned about the health and environmental effects of genetically modified food have protested vigorously against GM wheat, even sending slices of bread to the federal government last week as a symbol of their disapproval.

They quickly claimed victory for consumer power yesterday, and predicted that the Monsanto move will be a turning point in the approval of new genetically modified foods in Canada.

"A moratorium is just a matter of time," said a jubilant Nadège Adam, campaigner for the Council of Canadians. "It's an absolutely wonderful thing."

She said she's convinced that Monsanto's deferral of its wheat efforts is in fact a graceful way for the company to abandon the wheat market altogether, since it does not want to admit defeat to a band of activists.

"What brought this on was the resistance of consumers," she said.

Monsanto denied that the wheat board or protesters had anything to do with its decision, and said farmers in North America have been planting less and less spring wheat over the past few years. Spring wheat was Monsanto's target market. The company decided it would be better off spending its research and development funds on products that the market is ready for, Ms. Jordan explained.

"Wheat doesn't measure up."

The company was getting "mixed messages" from farmers about whether they would buy the genetically modified wheat, Ms. Jordan said. Monsanto will monitor developments in the wheat market and in biotechnology to see if, in four to eight years' time, market conditions are more receptive to Roundup Ready wheat, she added.

The company has not yet decided whether to withdraw completely its application to the federal government for approval of the product, she said. Monsanto will meet with regulators later this week to discuss next steps, a government spokeswoman said.

A company statement said Monsanto invested \$5-million (U.S.) and seven years in wheat, amounting to less than 1 per cent of its total research budget.

Agriculture Minister Bob Speller denied yesterday that the Monsanto announcement was a signal that Canada is unfriendly to biotechnology.

The federal government was a partner in the development of Monsanto's genetically modified wheat, but part of that deal was to expire this year.

Canada has already approved several genetically modified crops, including corn, soy, canola and potatoes.

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IPS (May 11, 2004)

Activists wary as Monsanto withdraws GE wheat

By Stephen Leahy

Brooklin, Canada -- Activists who fight genetically engineered products are declaring victory after agricultural giant Monsanto's decision to shelve plans to launch GE wheat in Canada and the United States. But some warn that the battle over the wheat, and GE crops in general, is far from over.

"I was surprised and sceptical about the announcement," says Marc Loiselle, an organic farmer in Saskatchewan. On closer examination Monsanto really said that it will begin to focus on other types of GE crops but also look at other types of GE wheat aside from the 'Round-Up Ready' varieties it has already developed, he says.

The company genetically engineered Round-up Ready wheat to withstand its herbicide of the same name.

The US-based firm did not respond to IPS requests for an interview, but in a statement Monsanto Executive Vice President Carl Casle said, "this decision allows us to defer commercial development of Roundup Ready wheat, in order to align with the potential commercialisation of other biotechnology traits in wheat, estimated to be four to eight years in the future."

The approval of GE wheat would have been a disaster for Canadian grain farmers and their grain trading company, the Canada Wheat Board (CWB). Nearly 90% of the CWB's customers had previously said they would not buy GE wheat.

"Monsanto has made the right decision by respecting the wishes of their customer farmers," CWB Chairman Ken Ritter said a statement.

"Farmers overwhelmingly opposed the introduction of Roundup Ready wheat, which offered few agronomic benefits and threatened to destroy premium markets for their product," he added.

Canadian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) joined farmers and others in a bitter three-year battle to stop the crop from being approved for use in Canada. Just last week, Friends of the Earth in the province of Quebec and the Council of Canadians launched a campaign to have Canadians mail Prime Minister Paul Martin a slice of bread to protest the government's support of GE wheat.

"Strong rejection of GE wheat from virtually every corner of the globe once again showed the resistance to GE foods," said Pat Venditti of Greenpeace Canada, in a statement.

Strong opposition by farmers, consumers and countries likely prompted Monsanto's decision, says Debra Harry, executive director of the US-based Indigenous Peoples Council on Biocolonialism.

The issue has particular relevance for indigenous people because GE crops are grown in open field environments and have the potential to affect neighbouring environments, including soil and water, Harry told IPS at the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York.

"Any time we can set a limit or stop the proliferation of GE crops, it's good for all of us," she added.

The NGO Genewatch UK is warning that as a result of Monsanto's decision and other companies' withdrawal of other GE crops from Europe, the developing world will likely become the focus of the biotechnology industry's market aspirations.

India is being used as a bridgehead into the vast cotton markets of Asia while South Africa is being used as an entry into the African continent, Genewatch Director Sue Mayer wrote in the 'Guardian' newspaper Tuesday.

"While supporters of biotechnology make claims for its ability to provide solutions to world hunger, those at the sharp end have a different perspective. Monsanto and the rest of the biotechnology industry may see these largely disempowered communities as easier to overcome than the consumers of the developed world," she added.

In 2002, two farmers in Canada's Saskatchewan province filed a class-action lawsuit against Monsanto to prevent the sale of GE wheat. They feared that seeds and pollen from neighbouring farms would blow onto their fields and contaminate their organic crops.

That lawsuit was part of a larger effort to get compensation from Monsanto over the loss of the organic oilseed rape market. Contamination from widely grown GE oilseed made it impossible to grow GE-free rape in Western Canada, the farmers alleged, and cost organic growers 14 million Canadian dollars (\$10 million) in lost sales.

"The lawsuit will continue despite the announcement," says Loiselle, who represents organic grain growers at the Saskatchewan Organic Directorate (SOD). However, an injunction to prevent Monsanto from planting more GE wheat in open field test plots will likely be dropped, he said.

After such a long, intense battle against GE wheat, Loiselle remains wary about the company's aims.

"It doesn't look like Monsanto (has) officially withdrawn their application for commercialisation to the Canadian government," he points out.

Despite this week's announcement, the biotech juggernaut continues to roll, according to BIO, the industry association. Eighteen countries are now growing 67 million hectares (165 million acres) of GM crops, chiefly cotton, maize and soya. The area planted with GM strains rose 15% in 2003, it adds.

Harry cautions that corporations, partnered with the World Trade Organisation (WTO), will continue to do whatever they can to prevent opposition to and increase the spread of GE crops.

"It will take continued activism to stop all of the other GE food sources," she predicts.