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Genetically Modified Canola Recalled Because of Traces of Alternative Variety

By STEPHEN THORNE

OTTAWA (CP) - Monsanto Canada Inc. has recalled about 10 per cent of its genetically modified canola seed in an effort to protect millions of dollars in Canadian exports.

The Winnipeg-based firm issued a recall notice Wednesday after trace amounts of another herbicide-resistant variety were found in its Quest variety seeds marketed by Agricore and Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. Quest canola, or GT-73, is approved for export but the alternative version, known as GT-200, is not.

"It's a fairly significant development," a federal official said on condition of anonymity. "This has the ability to compromise exports of the Canadian canola crop."

The Quest seeds made up about one-tenth of Canada's canola crop last year. Canola exports were worth \$1.8 billion, about half of that genetically modified.

The Canadian Health Coalition said the recall is like "a canary in a mine falling over dead" and highlights the lack of control over genetically modified foods.

"We don't have segregation of approved crops versus crops not approved and we really don't have any regulation in force," said spokesman Mike McBane. "Basically, it's a self-policing industry."

"There can be no assurance that our food supply is safe from genetically contaminated material or even from rogue genes. This is a deadly combination of unknown hazards and uncontrollable risk."

He predicted genetically modified crops will spell the death of Canadian grain exports.

But Andrew Marsland, director general of Agriculture Canada's International Markets Bureau, said Monsanto acted quickly and responsibly and there should be no concern.

"The point of the recall is to prevent any damage to exports," Marsland said in an interview. "It's not a safety issue at all, or a health issue. It was basically done to meet regulatory requirements in all the export markets."

A company statement said routine quality testing determined some Quest seed lots contain trace levels of an alternative version of the Roundup Ready trait.

Monsanto said both versions are approved in Canada and completely safe, but the companies are acting to avoid trade issues with other countries.

"There is no question of safety, but we all take quality very seriously," said Kerry Preete, Monsanto's vice-president of global product management.

Agricore and Saskatchewan Wheat Pool will provide other seeds to canola farmers, most of whom have not yet planted their 2001 crops, said Monsanto spokesman Loren Wassell.

"Perhaps a very small amount of this year's crop has been planted," said Wassell, adding "that will be addressed as well."

Monsanto has between 20 and 30 varieties of canola that have been genetically improved to tolerate Roundup herbicide, almost all of them approved for export, said Wassell.

Last year, at least five million of 12 million acres of Canada's canola crop was genetically modified. About nine million acres was herbicide-tolerant. Transgenic canola was introduced in 1996.

Wassell said the company is concentrating on replacing the seeds and will determine later what caused the problem.

The federal trade source said the key to the recall's effectiveness lies in the response of foreign markets, particularly Japan, the primary importer of raw seed for crushing into oil and meal for animal feed.

"In the case of Japan, they're very longstanding and very loyal buyers of Canadian canola," the source said, "and they have a huge, multibillion-dollar crushing industry that depends on Canadian canola."