

Modified food grows despite protest

Company controlling food,
Gormley farmer says

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer

John Doner steps into a field of soybeans planted two weeks earlier and tears out some pigweed.

"We just sprayed this today," says the Gormley man, who farms 4,000 acres along the urban edge of Richmond Hill.

Mr. Doner had applied a generic form of Roundup, a herbicide farmers use to burn fields clean of vegetation. "These weeds now, if you come back here in a week, they should be just deader than door-nails."

But the rows of soy won't be harmed. In 10 more days the plants will start to flower, but Mr. Doner may spray again if necessary.

"You can't have weeds in crop," he says.

Mr. Doner enjoys "absolute weed control" because the soy is Roundup Ready, the genetically modified variety that has become the norm in Ontario.

But he dislikes the power of Monsanto, which owns his genetically modified seed and also produces Roundup. The company rigorously pursues anyone it believes is illegally using Monsanto seeds.

The multi-national can send inspectors — some farmers call them police — into Mr. Doner's fields next year. If the inspectors spray Roundup on what are supposedly non-genetically modified beans and they don't die, "you're going to court," he says. And "they're not coming after you for 1,000 bucks."

Besides the cost of genetically modified seeds, Mr. Doner must pay for a "technical use agreement" — royalties for Monsanto's expertise.

"Monsanto is controlling your food," says Mr. Doner, his arm slashing the air. "The farmers are the smallest rung in your ladder now."

His dismay is shared by other farmers, but that's not stopping Roundup Ready soy. Two seasons ago, 30 per cent of the province's soy acreage was Roundup Ready. This year, it's 50 or 55 per cent, according to the Ontario Soybean Growers Marketing Board.

At the same time, Europeans and other consumers' reluctance to buy genetically modified organisms provides Ontario farmers with a growing niche market for unaltered beans. Kim Cooper, the soy board's market co-ordinator, has urged growers not to blow it by letting



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION/MIKE BARRETT

More corn and soybean crops are being grown with genetically modified seeds.

genetically modified soybeans slip into GMO-free shipments. "Our reputation could be shot," he warned.

Mr. Doner grows both genetically modified and non-genetically modified beans and thinks he can keep them separated, but says Monsanto — not the farmer — should be accountable when a GMO-free soy crop is contaminated.

And crop contamination is inevitable. Some farmers and experts say it's now impossible to grow a pure field of non-GM canola on the Canadian prairies because of the dominance of Roundup Ready varieties there.

Canola plants resistant to three herbicides — evidence of GMO cross-breeding — were found growing along the Canadian side of the St. Lawrence River, says Suzanne Wuerthele, a regional toxicologist for the United States

Environmental Protection Agency.

Monsanto is fighting to have its Roundup Ready wheat approved for sale in Canada. Mr. Doner thinks genetically modified wheat is a mistake. "You will have contamination," he says, "because pollen moves."

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But in 1990, he was one of York Region's first to grow insect-resistant Bt corn, so new at the time a Chinese delegation came to see it.

Bt corn, a GMO which produces a bacterial protein poisonous to a

pest called the European corn borer, is a godsend for farmers, says Mr. Doner. He recalled how the worms once hollowed out his corn stalks so they often rotted and blew over in the fall.

Few farmers in the region still refuse to grow Bt corn, adds Mr. Doner, who says the year's first frost doesn't bother it either.

"The sugars in the stalk are different. They don't freeze as easy."

These days, he only grows non-Bt as a buffer around his crop — to stall the development of corn borers that can resist the toxin.

He has heard of Bt varieties carrying a secondary "event" to control other pests and predicts companies will one day sell three or four events in one seed.

Mr. Doner may not have long to wait. Dozens of experimental transgenic food crops were grown in Ontario last year, including varieties

of corn combining an insect resistance or fungal resistance with a herbicide tolerance. Canola with both insect and antibiotic resistance was tried, as was genetically modified tobacco with reduced nicotine.

Farmers can keep these experimental crops secret even from their neighbours. It's a precaution against thieves and vandals, says Phil Macdonald, a manager of environmental release assessment for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

Mr. Macdonald says the fields are visited by inspectors and all experimental plant material has to be accounted for and destroyed. None of the hundreds of experimental genetically modified foods, he maintains, has ever escaped.

Once a crop has approval for use as food, however, its continued segregation from non-genetically modified varieties is beyond the agency's authority, Mr. Macdonald says. "All we'll say is this stuff is safe to grow."

Experimental crops are also being grown here to produce pharmaceuticals. The reason, Ms Wuerthele says, is extracting drugs from engineered plants in a field can be cheaper for companies than making them in a lab.

But the farming of drugs in the open "is approaching total lunacy," says Prof. Joe Cummins, a geneticist at the University of Western Ontario.

"They're saying to these average farmers, 'You can make a bundle by growing pharmaceuticals in your field.'"

Prof. Cummins says corn modified to produce a drug called interleukin-10 was recently grown near London without controls to stop possible seed release or contamination through water runoff.

People or animals who drank water tainted by such a crop or its soil could compromise their immune systems, he charges.

A spokesperson for Health Canada, which oversees such experiments, could not be reached for comment.

In Richmond Hill last year, broadcaster and geneticist David Suzuki reminded an audience the pesticide DDT seemed a scientific triumph until biologists discovered it was killing birds and collecting in higher animals through biomagnification, something no one knew when DDT was introduced.

"And mark my words, exactly the same thing is going to be the case with GMOs," he says, because, as with any revolutionary technology, most current ideas about GMOs will turn out to be wrong.

"So what the hell is the hurry?"

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