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Articles

Michael Meacher: To know the truth about GM, ask the Canadians

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The lesson of their experience is that co-existence between conventional and GM farming is a mirage

Oldham West and
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What would happen if early next year the Government decided to allow GM crops to be grown commercially in this country? To find out, go to Canada, where GM crops were introduced into the prairies in 1997. With what results? I have just spent a week in Saskatchewan and Ontario finding out.

When the technology was first applied in the prairies seven years ago, the farmers were enthusiastic. Monsanto and the other big biotech companies promised that there would be higher yields, less herbicide usage, little or no cross-contamination and ready containment of "volunteers" (plants that survive the harvest and become weeds when different crops are later planted). It has not turned out like that at all.

Yields were found to be lower because contamination was wider than predicted, herbicide use was not reduced, and often had to be increased, and volunteers were much more difficult to deal with than expected. There were no gains to consumers that might have balanced the losses to the farming producers. And the environmental impacts, assumed to be benign on the specious principle that GM crops were "substantially equivalent" to non-GM varieties, turned out to be seriously adverse. There was damage to wildlife, new superweeds were generated and ecosystems that support insects and birds were destroyed.

There are several lessons that Britain can, and should, learn from the Canadian experience. The most important is that "co-existence" - a framework to ensure that organic and conventional farming can survive and prosper alongside GM farming - is a mirage. In Saskatchewan, organic oilseed rape (which the Canadians call canola) has been wiped out by cross-contamination from Monsanto's "Roundup Ready" GM canola. The issue for Britain is that if it is impossible to separate off organic oilseed rape in the vast spaces of the Canada prairies, it is inconceivable that it can be kept separate in the very much smaller land area of Britain where farms exist cheek by jowl together.

Even more disturbing is that pollution of organic crops does not come primarily airborne, from pollen, but from contamination of the seed supply. The most famous example of this in Canada is the case of the farmer Percy Schmeiser. He saved seed from his harvest and planted it the next year, only to find that some of it was GM, even though he had never allowed any GM crops on his farm. Extraordinarily, he was taken to court by Monsanto on the grounds that the company had patented the gene in the GM plants on his farm and he had infringed the patent. The company won the lawsuit. If that has been happening in Canada, there is no reason to doubt that Monsanto will use the same tactics in Britain.

Another problem is the removal of volunteers and GM weeds. Volunteers are already resistant to the chemical weedkiller (glyphosate, known as Roundup Ready) used for cultivation, and weeds and other plants can also acquire this resistance through the transgene flow from the GM oilseed rape and wheat. So in addition to the two or three field sprays by glyphosate, it is then necessary to use other, old-fashioned, toxic chemicals such as 2,4-D to destroy remaining weeds. The President of the Canadian NFU, whom I met, quoted a university study showing that the cost of chemical spraying to Canadian farmers now amounted to nearly £200m a year.

This problem is further compounded by two other unexpected factors that I encountered in Canada and that would also occur in Britain if GM commercialisation were ever introduced here. One is that volunteers don't just spring up the year after the original harvest. The seeds may subsist in the ground for years, and volunteers often arise three to five years later.

Labelling and liability are also issues both in Canada and the UK. Contrary to the general impression that North America is quite content with GM and not worried by it, several

recent polls have shown that 92-97 per cent of Canadians believe that their government should require companies to label GM products. In the EU, labelling of GM food will soon be required above a 0.9 per cent threshold, though that will still not tell consumers what they really want to know - whether this food is GM-free or not.

Liability - the question of who pays if an organic or conventional farmer has his business damaged or his livelihood ruined by contamination from GM crops - is now becoming a crunch issue both in Canada and Europe. There is huge resistance from the biotech industry on both sides of the Atlantic to accepting any responsibility for the contamination they cause.

One other highly relevant piece of evidence shown to me by the Canadian NFU about the current battleground in Canada concerns the tactics adopted by Monsanto to get the unpopular idea of GM wheat accepted. A draft letter, to be signed by prominent farmers in key positions, details the "mutual understanding and agreement" between each of them and Monsanto about how they will assist, secretly, in "ensuring the positive introduction of Roundup Ready Wheat in Canada".

We have to ask: is the same happening here, or will it happen here in the future?