

At Tilson's office ? Local rally targets genetically modified alfalfa

By Lindsey Papp

'Say No to GMO' was the overwhelming theme recently during a Day of Action rally to stop genetically modified alfalfa held outside Dufferin-Caledon MP David Tilson's Orangeville office.

Citizens from 17 communities in Ontario rallied outside their federal Member of Parliament constituency offices for an hour.

'We're out because we're in opposition to the registration of genetically modified alfalfa,' said local organic farmer Brenda Dolling.

'If GM alfalfa gets on the market, there won't be regular alfalfa or organic alfalfa ever again. It'll be all contaminated, because it's a perennial and the bees carry the pollen. They don't recognize farm lines or anything like that.'

Dolling has been an organic farmer for 10 years. She believes very strongly that not only is GM alfalfa an issue for farmers, but consumers should be aware and educated about the ramifications should the GM alfalfa seeds get on the market. Forage Genetics International (FGI) has applied Monsanto's genetically modified Roundup Ready (RR) herbicide-resistant technology to alfalfa.

'We're very worried about it,' she said. 'There is going to be a real issue with safety and health for food because livestock eat it, its used as a soil enhancer, so its going to spread. It's a big thing; alfalfa's bigger than corn and soya.'

Farmers have not asked for GM alfalfa, she explained, saying farmers who grow hay for their livestock and seed don't need to use much herbicides, so developing a GM seed that's resistant to herbicide is unnecessary.

'If you grow hay densely enough, which is alfalfa, grasses and clover, you don't need a weed killer, so it doesn't make sense to us,' she said. 'It's just a way of them making money, it's going to cost more for the seed.'

Dolling said FGI has already been turned away by western farmers, so now they have come east to try to get it in the market here.

'It's a secretive process, we don't have much to say about it,' said Dolling. 'It's done at the federal level, so what we're trying to do here is tell our federal MP that we're against it and to please do something about it.'

The rally was to express to the local MP that they want him to do something about the dangerous situation. They hope that in Parliament, he will approach the correct committee and petition against it.

Community awareness and public education were important parts of the rally, and judging by the number of positive acknowledgements by residents driving by the rally, participants aren't the only ones against GMO (genetically modified organisms) to voice their opinions. However, Dolling said there are a lot of people who aren't aware of what is going on and how it's going to affect them.

'This isn't just about the organics industry,' she said. 'Conventional farmers that want regular alfalfa won't have a choice any more either.'

Over the past 10 years, seed prices, like everything else, have increased, but GM seeds are still costlier on the market compared to non-GM seeds.

Dolling used the example of farmer Percy Schmeiser, who farmed east of Saskatoon and refused to pay Monsanto a \$15-an-acre technology fee when some of the firm's GM canola was found in his 1,400-acre farm.

Schmeiser said that he never planted the GMO seeds, stating that you can't plant a crop like that and not expect the seeds to migrate without warning into other fields.

In 2004 the Supreme Court of Canada agreed, and while ruling that the Monsanto patent in question was valid, Schmeiser should not have to pay the fee.

Dolling says GMO is very scary for the rights and economic health of farmers.

'If my neighbour or somebody down the road starts using this seed if it's registered, then ours could be contaminated,' she said.

'Then we can't call ourselves organic any more, we can't sell on the organic market any more. It really would disadvantage all the farmers in an area, and eventually everywhere, because it would move everywhere. GM would affect everybody.'