

## **GM Crops - A US Farming Perspective**

### **Summary**

This month the US National Family Farm Coalition, in conjunction with Greenpeace, held public meetings to which farmers were invited to hear about the experience of US growers and other farmers regarding the impacts of the commercial introduction of GM crops. Following a number of requests for more information from those who were unable to attend, here's a summary of the meetings and other subsequent developments.

Three farmers came to the UK to share their experiences - John Kinsman (Vice-President of the National Family Farm Coalition and a dairy farmer from Wisconsin), Corky Jones, (who sits on the executive of the American Corn Growers Association and farms 2800 acres in Nebraska) and Jim Goodman (who farms 450 acres in Wisconsin).

They addressed meetings in Norwich, Lincoln and Dundee and met with various MP's including Tim Yeo (Conservative Agriculture Spokesperson), Peter Luff (then Chair of Agriculture Select Committee) and David Heath (Lib. Dem. Agriculture Spokesperson).

The main concerns raised by the farmers were that, rather than benefiting the farming community, the introduction of GM crops has led to greater economic uncertainty, drops in commodity prices, problems of seed availability, issues around non-GM contamination, consumer rejection and aggressive "seed policing" tactics by agro-chemical companies.

*"GMO's do not provide a quick solution to the economic problems of US farmers. As time goes on the technology is proving to be more of a hindrance than a help"* - John Kinsman

### **Economic Uncertainty**

*"Farmers don't know if they are going to have a market next week"* - American Corn Growers Association, February 2000

*"Farmers in the US are in bad shape economically, farms are being lost at a rapid pace and they are trying to do anything that they can to survive"* - Jim Goodman

*"American farmers have been used as guinea pigs. The US economy is booming, yet our farmers are producing below cost. We can't go on this way. We are here to warn you Brits not to go down the same route"* - Corky Jones

*Only 0.7% of the US population are now involved with farming, and nearly 80% rely on some off-farm income"* - John Kinsman

Whilst there has been a phenomenal increase in GM acreage - a six fold increase in the years 1997-99, US maize sales to Europe have dropped dramatically - from 70 million bushels in 1997 to just 3 million in 1999.

Within the last 6 months Archer Daniel Midland (ADM) have started paying a premium on non-GM maize leading many farmers to delay their buying decisions or revert to traditional crop varieties this season. A survey by the American Farm Bureau in January 2000 suggests a drop in GMO maize planting of up to 25% this year.

### **Seed Availability**

*"There is a very limited supply of non GMO seed in our area (Indiana). I know this because I am a dealer for Golden Harvest. Just about every variety of Round-up Ready beans are still available because no-one is sure there will be a market for them"* - US farming discussion list  
[www.agriculture.com](http://www.agriculture.com), January 2000

*"I am hearing this every day. I talked with a Pioneer customer yesterday in which he stated that out of a 300 bag non-GMO corn order he was delivered 76 units of corn"* - US farming discussion list  
[www.agriculture.com](http://www.agriculture.com), January 2000

Contrary to arguments from agro-chemical companies that farmers will always have choice in their seed buying decisions, within 4 years of the introduction of GM varieties farmers in many areas are struggling to obtain non-GMO supplies. The introduction of GM has further threatened the independence of the US farming community.

### **Yields**

In the first comprehensive study of yields of GM vs. non-GM soya US agronomist Chuck Benbrook considered over 8,200 university trials of Soybeans in 1998. On average, the yield of top GM varieties was 6.7% less than comparable conventional ones. Further, across all varieties tested there was an average yield drag of 5.3% in GM varieties.

*"Overall there's no increase in yields and no increase in financial returns"*- Corky Jones

Corky grew 1000 acres of Round up Ready Soya in 1999, noticed no difference in yield with previous conventional crops. Further, any savings in herbicide usage was offset by the "technology fee" incorporated in to the cost of his GM seeds.

### **Cross-pollination and Genetic Pollution**

*"GM crops have encroached upon US farmers' right to produce ordinary, GM-free, crops. On the production side they find their way into the seed we buy and through cross-pollination, into the grain we grow. In just a few years, non-GMO crops have suddenly become treated as speciality crops, that need specific production and distribution channels in order for them to remain untainted. It should be the other way around!"* - Jim Goodman

*"The question over legal liability is weighing on farmers minds, as they want to protect themselves from potential lawsuits stemming from contamination brought about by cross-pollination"* -Corky Jones

In North America the most widely publicised contamination incident involves Percy Schmeiser, a Canadian farmer currently growing conventional varieties who is being sued by Monsanto for growing Round-Up Ready Oilseed Rape without license. Mr Schmeiser claims that he never planted Monsanto's product and that it has contaminated his fields via neighbours who have used it. The case has yet to be resolved.

### **Illegal Use of GM Seed**

In the US over 500 farmers have been sued by Monsanto for alleged illegal use of their GM seed.

After planting 1000 acres of GM Soya in 1999 Corky was visited by the Pinkerton Detective Agency, hired by Monsanto to ensure that farmers are not saving their seed. His neighbour was taken to court this year and fined \$30,000 dollars after a visit by Pinkertons. In 1998 Monsanto set up a hotline for farmers to call if they suspected their neighbours were involved in "pirating" Monsanto seed.

### **Herbicide Resistance**

Within the last week New Scientist Magazine has reported that volunteer oilseed rape has been found in Alberta, Canada - resistant to Roundup, Liberty and Pursuit herbicides. The farmer concerned had been growing GM oilseed rape for 2 years.

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