

Market 'Risk' Once Part of Process

By Barry Wilson, Ottawa bureau

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency quietly changed the terms of reference for its advisory committee on grain variety registration last year when it discovered that for more than a decade, the committee could include market impact in its deliberations.

The demand for a market impact test is at the heart of a campaign by the Canadian Wheat Board, millers, bakers and some farm groups to delay registration of genetically modified wheat until buyers will accept it.

So far, Ottawa has resisted the call for a cost-benefit analysis as part of the registration process, insisting that the science-based process cannot be politicized.

But as early as 1990, the wheat, rye and triticale subcommittee of the Prairie Registration Recommending Committee for Grain included in its operating procedures a "definition of merit" clause allowing its members to look beyond agronomics, quality and disease resistance when considering new varieties.

"Candidates that introduce production or marketing risks for their own or for other wheat classes may be rejected regardless of merit in other traits," said the operating procedures manual.

CFIA officials found out about it in late March 2001 and vice-president Peter Brackenridge quickly summed up the impact for then-president Ron Doering.



"If the members of this subcommittee, which includes representation from farmers, agronomists, breeders, pathologists, seed companies and grain quality experts, strongly believe that a (Roundup-resistant) wheat could cause marketing risks for other traditional wheat, they could vote to not support it for registration," he wrote in a memo acquired under access-to-information laws by Canadian Health Coalition researcher Brad Duplisea.

The CFIA quickly moved to tell the committee it should not use the power to let market issues influence recommendations. And last year, it had the operating procedures changed to remove the clause.

"Once we brought it up and the CFIA took note of it, they came back and said they didn't think it appropriate that it be there, or that it be used," Robert Graf, a wheat breeder at the Agriculture Canada research centre in Lethbridge and a former chair of the wheat, rye and triticale subcommittee said in an April 7 interview.

"So there is confusion about this issue and it really has to be cleared up."

Graf said the agency was within its rights to change the terms of reference.

"We can only recommend," said Graf. "They don't have to listen to the recommendation. Most of the time they would accept it but they don't have to."

He said he did not believe the market impact test has been used to reject a variety.

Before the CFIA acted, the Canadian Wheat Board thought it had found a way to keep GM wheat out of the system, despite government insistence it was not possible under the rules.

"We have initiated discussions with CFIA, (Agriculture Canada) and others on this topic and it seemed to me everyone was operating on the understanding that market impact is not part of the process today and that significant regulatory and/or legislative change would be necessary to introduce it," Graf said in an e-mail message to a CFIA official April 11, 2001 asking for more details.

Now, after the CFIA removed that option, the CWB is back before government officials and committees asking that a similar option be put back into the registration system.