

A Modified Predicament

BY LISA HARE
P&D Correspondent

Early this year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture approved unrestricted planting of genetically modified (GM) alfalfa engineered by Monsanto.

To the average consumer that might not sound like such a big deal — after all, how much alfalfa do humans eat?

But the sweet perennial is the primary food source for cattle — dairy and some beef — especially those raised organically.

A broad coalition of groups, ranging from U.S. farmers to environmental organizations to public advocacy groups such as the Center for Food Safety, have filed suit in federal court to block USDA's decision.

THE ORGANIC SIDE

"The organic producers and the commercial growers who raise (alfalfa) for seed aren't too happy right now," said hay producer Gary Freeburg of Gayville.

Even though organic hay prices tend to be higher than hay that isn't organic, there is still a very high demand for it. In fact, demand is so high that it is difficult for producers to keep up.

Organic dairies are the primary market for organic hay producers, although farmers of organic beef are also potential customers. Hay quality is an essential consideration for both markets. But now that the government has approved the use of GM alfalfa, organic hay producers are worried this could bring an end to organic products, ranging from milk and yogurt to organic beef.

By law, no GM ingredients can be used in the production of anything labeled "organic," yet alfalfa has a propensity to cross-pollinate across miles, and so far, no one has come up with a way to control that. Over time, opponents say, there's no way to ensure that the GM variety doesn't intermix with the non-GM variety.

THE SEED GROWER SIDE

It isn't only organic producers that are threatened by GM alfalfa. Producers of alfalfa seed could go the way of the soybean seed cleaners of yesterday.

As a third-generation alfalfa seed producer and plaintiff in the case against Monsanto and its partners, Pat Trask of Wall has a lot at stake in the outcome of the issue.

"Alfalfa is the fourth-largest crop grown in South Dakota," he said.

"Since the very first discussions of (Monsanto's) introduction of GM alfalfa, my family, as well as others, have pondered with great anxiety, the potential repercussions."

Unlike soybeans and corn, which are annual plants, alfalfa — a perennial — carries far more risks associated with cross-contamination to non-GM fields.

"Court testimony from scien-

Not Everyone's Ready For Roundup-Ready Alfalfa



PHOTO: METRO GRAPHICS

tists revealed contamination to non-GM alfalfa fields far exceeded the recommended buffer zones for the GM fields," Trask said.

He added that seeds that fall to the ground from the alfalfa plants can live within the soil for six months or 60 years, then germinate again, so once a field is contaminated with genetically altered plants, it would be contaminated forever.

Experts say contamination from GM alfalfa is certain.

"Once that genie has been released from the bottle, there's no way of getting it back in," Trask added.

What's worse for producers, the biotech company that engineers the seed holds a patent trademark on the altered product, so theoretically, once a field is contaminated with GM alfalfa, the crop automatically becomes the intellectual property of the biotech company and the farmer is guilty of trademark infringement.

THE WILD CARD FACTOR

Opponents also charge that widespread use of GM alfalfa will result in the release of an estimated 23 million more pounds of toxic chemicals into the environment. That's because Monsanto developed its GM alfalfa to withstand application of its Roundup herbicide.

"Roundup Ready alfalfa is supposed to produce a higher quality hay," Freeburg said. "The biggest problem any hay producer faces is weeds. ... Roundup takes care of that."

Currently, more than 90 percent of the alfalfa grown in the U.S.

does not use any herbicide, according to the USDA. Critics say that planting GM alfalfa will not only lead to more herbicide use, it will encourage an already growing problem of herbicide-resistant weeds called "superweeds."

Much like how heavy usage of antibiotics created strains of drug-resistant germs and bacteria, the continuous use of glyphosate — the main active ingredient in Roundup — has caused the creation of weeds that are immune to the poison. At least 10 species of weeds in 22 states have become resistant to weed killers, affecting 7-10 million acres of farmland.

"We spray and spray and spray, and we don't really know what we could run into down the road," Freeburg said. "But I understand both sides of the issue. If we have the technology, people want to be able to use it."

According to Trask, superweeds are not the worst to be feared with glyphosate use in alfalfa.

"I haven't met one beekeeper who isn't traumatized by the effects of glyphosate on their colonies," he said.

The American Honey Bee Association submitted an official position statement against the approval of GM alfalfa to Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack. That is in addition to more than 225,000 letters from farmers.

Trask added that scientists are beginning to link glyphosate pass-through — residues passed from feeds to animals to humans — with infertility and immune disorders.

"(GM alfalfa) benefits absolutely no one and nothing, except the one company that will ultimately become the sole vendor of the crop," Trask added.

In a press release issued by the coalition opposing the approval of GM alfalfa, one plaintiff said approving the unrestricted planting of GE alfalfa is a blatant case of the USDA serving one form of agriculture at the expense of all others.

"If this decision is not remedied, the result will be lost livelihoods for organic dairy farmers, loss of choice for farmers and consumers, and no transparency about (GM) contamination of our foods," the plaintiff said.

Local Growers Place In National Corn Yield Contest

ST. LOUIS — An area corn grower has been honored as a state winner in the 2010 National Corn Yield Contest (NCYC), sponsored annually by the National Corn Growers Association (NCGA).

Tom Arens of Yankton, placed second in the state in the E Class with a yield of 239.1427 bushels per acre. The hybrid used in the winning field was Pioneer 34F07.

Frank Kralicek of Yankton, placed third in the state in the A Class with a yield of 237.6358 bushels per acre. The hybrid used in the winning field was Pioneer 33Z74.

The local growers were one of 522 state winners nationwide. The 2010 contest had a record 7,125 entries from 46 states. Of the state winners, 24 growers — three from each of eight classes — were named national winners, representing 12 states.

The average yield among national winners was 301.7 bushels per acre — greater than the 217.6 bushels per acre average for all entrants, and more than the 2010 U.S. average of 154.3 bushels per acre. Nine entrants recorded yields of 300 bushels or more per acre.

Agronomic data gleaned from the contest reveal the following:

- Average planting population for the national winners was 36,246 seeds per acre, compared to 33,460 for all entrants.

- National winners applied an average of 259 pounds of nitrogen, 74 pounds of phosphorus and 69 pounds of potassium per acre.

- Average commercial nitrogen use per bushel of yield was 0.86 pounds for the national winners and 0.88 pounds for all entrants.

- Fifty-four percent of the national winners applied trace minerals, compared to 31 percent of all entrants.

- Twenty-five percent of national winners applied manure, compared to 16 percent of all entrants.

The winners were recognized March 4 at the 2011 Commodity Classic — the premier convention and trade show of the U.S. corn, soybean, sorghum and wheat industries — held in Tampa, Fla. For a complete list of winners and for more information about NCYC, visit the NCGA Web site at www.ncga.com.



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