

Opinion

Canola Threatens The Seed Purity Of Brassica

BY RITA BRHEL
P&D Correspondent

Brassicas don't win a lot of popularity contests. Particularly, broccoli gets regular ribbing as a child-unfriendly vegetable. Perhaps if this news piece had something to do with apples or watermelon or potatoes — Lord knows people would freak out if their French fries were messed with — or even carrots, this would have become a national headline.

Basically, there is a region in the state of Oregon, known as Willamette Valley — which is as recognizable in the vegetable world as Napa Valley is in the wine world — that is among the top five places in the world for growing and supplying specialty seed. This is the place where both large-scale growers and backyard gardeners get their seeds. And among these specialty seeds are brassicas, a family of vegetables that includes not only broccoli but also cauliflower, arugula, rutabaga, turnip, radish, kale, cabbage, and the like.

Canola is another brassica. I've never eaten canola — well, as a vegetable. I use canola oil. But, apparently, canola is not a nice brassica — or maybe it plays too nicely with others. Canola, according to Oregon State University research, very easily cross-pollinates with many other brassicas, especially turnips, broccoli raab, rutabaga, some kales, and possibly radish and broccoli. It loves to interbreed. In order to maintain seed purity of brassicas in Willamette Valley, the Oregon Department of Agriculture has maintained a canola exclusion zone in the Valley.

Until recently when, after a series of behind-closed-doors meetings with farmers who want to grow the plant for biodiesel or cooking oil, it has issued a temporary rule to allow canola — including genetically modified organism (GMO) varieties — to be grown in the Valley unchecked and with disregard to the previous isolation zone. The manner that the Department of Agriculture has done this allows them to skip the requirement of public commenting.

A representative of the Agriculture Department said that they were just trying to find a way for both sides to share the Valley, but it didn't take long before a lawsuit was filed and the courts have blocked the planting of canola until a ruling comes later this month.

Sigh. The most obvious observation of this whole mess is the gross error the state department made in changing planting zones of a previously banned crop without public announcement or transparency — that secret meetings, especially among law-making institutions, are in and of themselves not ethical. The second, perhaps less apparent, observation is that the state department didn't recognize that their handling of this Valley dispute affects a lot more people than the local producers bickering over geography — that their seemingly flippant decision affects growers worldwide.

You, as a consumer, may not think much about seed purity unless you're into organic gardening. You may not care that this radish is a different variety than this radish over here, as long as they're fresh and taste good. And biodiversity may seem like one of those nuances that only the tree-hugging people or retired horticulturists really get into. After all, do we really need 50 different varieties of a vegetable?

But here's a more universal threat that comes with not respecting biodiversity and seed purity: What if we only have a couple different varieties of broccoli and all of the varieties have been tainted with a touch of canola, so essentially, we're all eating a broccoli-canola mix, and then some disease comes by that attacks canola and we have a worldwide shortage of broccoli. Now, you who don't care much for broccoli might not care, but broccoli is a wonderful cheap and nutritious veggie especially in the winter months. Plus, any ruling like this will set the stage for future planting zone decisions. It reminds me of the whole deal with GMO sugar beets — you know, we eat these as sugar — being planted in areas of organic, non-GMO sugar beets. There's a legitimate concern, especially if you're a producer marketing non-GMO sugar beets, that the GMO would cross-pollinate with the non-GMO. And of course there's a legitimate concern if you're a consumer who prefers non-GMOs.

So, yeah, it's a much bigger issue than organic versus conventional producers, and much bigger than Willamette Valley. It's something that we should be following in the news, if only through the Internet grapevine and not in the national networks. And even if it is only broccoli.



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PHOTO: RITA BRHEL

This is an example of a wildflower meadow that can be incorporated on-farm to attract bees. “To be honest, the ecology community has never interfaced with agriculture,” according to Eric Mader, an assistant entomology professor at the University of Minnesota. “This is cutting-edge information.”

Bringing Back The Buzz

Consider Improving The On-Farm Habitat For Pollinators

BY RITA BRHEL
P&D Correspondent

It's not only fruit and vegetable growers who are interested in creating on-farm habitats for pollinating and other beneficial insects. All types of agricultural producers — from organic to conventional, from crops to livestock — are seeking ways to make their operations more bug-friendly. Part of the reason may be the sustainable movement, but it's likely because of the government's emphasis on conservation in its agricultural incentive programs.

“The 2008 Farm Bill specifically identified pollinators as a priority of the EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentive Program), as well as recommended inclusion in all conservation programs,” said Mace Vaughan, pollinator program director for the Xerces Society and a pollinator conservation specialist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service's West National Tech Support Center, both located in Portland, Ore.

Whatever the motivation, he said that natural resource conservationists across the country are receiving more calls from producers, usually recipients of EQIP dollars, seeking help in attracting bees to their farms.

HABITAT ASSESSMENT

There are three areas of habitat needs for all animals, Vaughan said. On-farm conservation requires the addition of a fourth.

“The first three [areas of habitat needs] deal with ecology of pollinators,” Vaughan said. “The fourth is the only one that looks at specific farm practices and how that affects biodiversity.”

- Good habitats for pollinators include:
1. Nesting Sites — Ground-nesting bees prefer areas of well-drained, bare sandy or sandy loam soil or ground with sparse vegetation. No-till cropping systems are particularly inviting. Wood- and cavity-nesting bees like brush piles, pithy shrubs like sumac, and native clump-forming grasses. These bees also readily occupy artificial nests, so this is an easy addition to improve on-farm habitat.
 2. Foraging Habitat — Bees prefer natural vegetation, and better ratings are given to farms consisting of at least a 45 percent cover of na-

tive plants such as pastures or a mix of native and naturalized, non-invasive plants such as alfalfa. Ideally, there would be at least five spring, summer, and fall flowering species in the mix. It's important to include the surrounding landscape, too, for at least a half mile in all directions from the site. Invasive flowering weeds and sod-forming grasses are not good foraging habitat for bees.

3. Other Landscape Features — Bees do better in larger habitat areas, of at least five acres. Bees are also attracted to riparian buffers, wind-

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There are a number of reasons why creating bee habitat is particularly challenging on the farm, including:

- Pesticides — Bees, like all beneficial insects, are sensitive to pesticides. Any habitat on the farm must be protected from pesticides and pesticide drift.
- Accessibility — At the same time, the habitat needs to be easily accessed by equipment for planting and maintenance.
- Sunlight — A wildflower meadow is just that — a wildflower plot, and most wildflowers require full sun conditions.

MACE VAUGHAN

breaks, fencerows, and flowering cover crops.

4. Farm Management — The top hazard on farms for bees is contact with pesticides, so the most ideal operations are organic or those that utilize Integrated Pest Management strategies. Conventional operations aren't ruled out if they reduce pesticide drift, and limit application to the night time hours and to plants outside the bloom period. Areas with minimal intrusion during the year, such as livestock pasture, are preferred by bees; where burning, mowing, or haying is done to more than half of the area discourages bee activity. Grazing plans that encourage wildlife abundance and diversity is optimal, as are fields where tilling is not used for weed control, such as no-till. However, tilled land can be considered as bee habitat if field borders are left intact.

HABITAT RESTORATION

After assessment, the next step is changing the fauna on the farm to attract bees.

“What we're talking about is non-crop habitat,” Vaughan said. “The amount of natural habitat on and around a farm has a direct influence on pollinator populations.”

The primary way is to plant a conservation cover, also called a wildflower meadow. The biggest question is how to incorporate that into production agricultural systems.

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Farmers Union Day Slated For The South Dakota State Fair In Huron Sept. 1

HURON — South Dakota Farmers Union, a nearly century-old family farm organization, will sponsor a wide range of activities during ‘Farmers Union Day’ at the South Dakota State Fair Saturday, Sept. 1. Activities the annual Farmer's Share Luncheon, a debate between the candidates for the state Public Utilities Commission, birthday cake to honor the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and other events.

Activities begin at 10:30 a.m. on the Freedom Stage when the South Dakota Farmers Union Foundation and Farmers Union Insurance honor the 25 recipients of the 2012 Insuring a Brighter Tomorrow scholarships. The recipients will share \$25,000 in scholarships funded by Farmers Union Insurance agents. Each recipient will attend a college, university or technical school in South Dakota this fall.

At 11 a.m., The SDFU Foundation will honor the 2012 recipients of the Rural Dakota Pride Award. Individuals are nominated

based on volunteerism in their local communities and then selected by the foundation to receive the award.

From 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. in the tent near the Freedom Stage Farmers Union will host its annual Farmer's Share Luncheon where people can get a full meal for a suggested donation of just \$1. They will also learn what the farmer's share of the retail food dollar really is. Last year, for a pulled-pork sandwich on a bun, baked beans, chips and milk the farmer's share was less than 40 cents.

At 1 p.m., U.S. House candidate Matt Varilek will discuss agriculture issues at the Freedom Stage and answer questions from the audience. Varilek had agreed to debate his Republican opponent, Rep. Kristi Noem, but the congresswoman declined to attend the debate.

The United States Department of Agriculture is celebrating its 150th anniversary this year, and Farmers Union will provide free birthday cake in the tent near the Freedom Stage. USDA officials will also be on hand to

talk with attendees.

From 3:15-4:30 p.m. on the Dakotaland Stage, candidates for the South Dakota Public Utilities Commission will participate in a debate. South Dakota Farmers Union and the South Dakota Rural Electric Association are co-hosting the event. All five candidates have confirmed their attendance and will take the stage together to discuss where they stand on issues the PUC deals with which affect consumers. The public is invited to attend and will have an opportunity to ask the candidates questions.

Anyone wearing Farmers Union apparel will be eligible to sign up to win a free desktop computer. Kids who bring their Farmers Union junior membership card will be able to sign up to win a Kindle Fire. Winners will be drawn at 2:30 p.m. on the Freedom Stage. You must be present to win both prizes. You must be wearing Farmers Union apparel at the time of the drawing to win the computer.

For more information on Farmers Union Day, visit www.sdfu.org.

Extension: Oral Leases Renew Automatically On Sept. 1

BROOKINGS — Oral farm leases will renew automatically for the next growing season on Sept. 1, 2012, unless written notice of intent to terminate or modify the existing lease is given before Sept. 1, says Burton Pflueger, SDSU Extension Farm Financial Management Field Specialist.

“Any lease that renews automatically carries the same terms and conditions as the existing lease. Once such notice is given, the existing lease still remains in effect until March 1, 2013, at which time the new contract becomes effective,” Pflueger said.

These rules apply to both the tenant and the landowner. Pflueger says the only exception is when one party fails to live up to the terms of the original agreement. He adds that any landlord or tenant who wants to terminate or modify an existing oral contract must no-

tify the other party by Sept. 1. Every year, the SDSU Extension receives calls from tenants and landlords who sought to make modifications to their farm leases but did not provide written notice for termination to the other party prior to Sept. 1.

“When wrongful termination occurs and the case goes to court, the injured party is normally awarded a ‘normal’ profit from the land, and sometimes punitive damages,” Pflueger said.

The date of automatic renewal was changed from Nov. 1 to Sept. 1 a number of years ago to protect tenants who plant fall-seeded crops such as winter wheat. Sometimes farmers and landlords forget about this change, especially where there are no fall-seeded crops grown or when the agreement is for grassland.

Labor Day Deadlines

The Yankton Daily Press & Dakotan will be closed Monday, September 3, for the Labor Day holiday.

The following deadlines will apply:

Out On The Town — Noon, Wednesday, August 29
Tuesday, September 4 newspaper — 5 p.m., Wednesday, August 29
Wednesday, September 5 newspaper — 5 p.m., Thursday, August 30
Thursday, September 6 newspaper — 5 p.m., Friday, August 31

There will be no newspaper on Monday, September 3, 2012

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