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News from Saskatchewan's Life Science Sector

Bill C-474 – A solution looking for a problem?

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A private member's bill currently before the Canadian Parliament proposes that an analysis of market impact be done before genetically engineered crops are approved, a move experts say could seriously damage Canada's biotech industry.

"While the intent of the amendment is admirable, the mechanism is flawed," said Dr. Peter Phillips in a presentation to the House of Commons Agriculture Committee on October 5th.

"It's a veritable Trojan horse that would destabilize the vitally important Canadian agri-food innovation system."

Phillips is a Professor of Public Policy at the Johnson Shoyama Graduate Institute of Public Policy at the University of Saskatchewan.

Introduced by British Columbia's NDP MP Alex Atamanenko, [Bill C-474](#) consists of a single sentence calling for an amendment of the Seeds Regulations "to require that an analysis of potential harm to export markets be conducted before the sale of any new genetically engineered seed is permitted."

[Atamanenko](#) claims fear of rejection from European Union (EU) markets, especially for alfalfa seed, were a driver for the bill. The introduction of Roundup Ready alfalfa was approved by the U.S. Supreme Court in July 2010, with limited plantings expected this fall. Roundup Ready alfalfa has not yet been commercialized in Canada.

The bill raised alarms in Canada's biotech industry. The biggest concern was that it would inject subjective, non-science criteria into the process required to have a biotechnology approved for use in Canada. Adding a non-scientific layer to the regulatory process and the uncertainty brought by this bill could also drive away research investment.

Dennis Prouse, Vice President, Government Affairs for CropLife Canada says the "thin veneer of a trade bill" covers an attempt by anti-technology, anti-business groups to further their agenda.

In addition to the issue of Roundup Ready alfalfa, [Atamanenko](#) was concerned about the crisis affecting the Canadian flax industry. In the 1990s, CDC Triffid, a genetically engineered herbicide-resistant flax variety developed at the University of Saskatchewan, was deregistered because of concerns in the flax industry that the EU would reject it, even after it passed stringent food and feed safety testing. Although Triffid was never commercialized, European claims that traces of the GM flax were present were used to block shipments of Canadian flax as late as January, 2010 – more than a decade later.

That said, regulations are meant to ensure safety and so must remain objective, according to Prouse. He explains that before a novel plant trait can go to market in Canada, it must first undergo rigorous testing for food, feed and environmental safety. Canada's regulatory system is science-based and internationally respected. Consumers can trust that Canadian products are safe.



Canada was the first country to have traits of modern biotechnology on the market - a huge opportunity for producers. Increased yields and cleaner crops that are resistant to insect pests are just some of the benefits of the technology. The industry has expanded to about 20 million acres per year in Canada and 350 million acres globally. Sheer volume, not more regulation, is the most pressing need.

Prouse says that with plant biotechnology innovations increasing, keeping up with the volume of new submissions is a challenge for the regulatory system. Canada must prepare for an explosion of activity on this front.

“With the onset of stacked traits and the synergies that are emerging as researchers become increasingly adept at understanding the inner workings of plant life, we anticipate that in the next five years there will be 125 applications for approval, compared to 33 approvals over the past 10 years.”

Adding another layer of regulation – particularly a subjective one – would compound this challenge. Prouse says Bill C-474 would make the process “incredibly unpredictable and have dire consequences for innovation in Canada, something that would be harmful not only to our industry but more importantly to the farmers who rely on our technologies as a component of their business success.”

It’s also unnecessary. Prouse emphasizes that pre-market assessments are part of every Canadian plant biotechnology company’s business model. Ag-biotech companies already adhere to stewardship and marketing protocols such as CropLife Canada’s [Market Analysis Principles](#) (MAP), the Canola Council’s [Export Ready program](#) , and Biotechnology Industry Organization’s (BIO) [Product Launch Stewardship program](#)

“Well before any product goes forward for regulatory approval, a full assessment of the product’s market acceptability is completed to ensure that Canada’s primary export markets will accept the new technology.” He adds, “It would be bad business not to do a market analysis.”

Dave Sippell, president of the Canadian Seed Trade Association, in an online [video interview](#) conducted by *Real Agriculture* says Bill C-474 would put the decision of whether or not we have new technologies for our Canadian growers into the hands of politicians from our market countries. The point may be moot, however, as the bill, slated for a final vote in the House of Commons in December, has garnered little support.

Biotech proponents argue that Canada’s science-based regulatory system are sufficient, and that market considerations are best left to those who stand to make – or lose – money from those decisions.

“Matching demand and supply is something the market is best suited to lead – supported by government but not led by or constrained by inflexible government rules,” Phillips says.

Through the principles laid out in MAP, for example, “developers agree to fully analyze and identify associated risks regarding safety, agronomic management and international trade prior to the commercialization of a new biotech product or technology, and produce a risk management action plan based on best management practices for production and trade.” CropLife Canada membership comprises major ag-biotech players such as BASF, Bayer CropScience, Dow AgroSciences Canada, Dupont, Monsanto, Pioneer Hi-Bred, and Viterra .

Biotechnology has been widely accepted in Canada by both producers and the public.



BIOTECANADA'S [2009 National Study](#) prepared by Nanos Research shows that, "nine out of 10 Canadians see biotech as important to Canada's future economic prosperity," and 88 percent of Canadians support research that involves biotech.

According to Prouse, the first step towards market acceptance in the European Union is to work with like-minded countries to get the EU to agree to a commercially viable, technical solution for Low Level Presence (LLP) of GM crops. This would mean, for example, that a wheat shipment would not be turned away because of a few GM canola seeds in the ship. Representatives from Canada, the United States, Argentina, and Brazil have already written to the EU to request this. Canadian Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz, and U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack are both committed to a policy on LLP.

(For an overview of Canada's regulatory system, check out [BioRegulations](#), a virtual office hosted by Industry Canada).

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