

**This article is reprinted from the Summer 2009 issue of *The Organic Report* published by the Organic Trade Association**

### **OTA in Canada joins fight against GE alfalfa**

*By Alex MacDonald*

The approval of genetically engineered (GE) alfalfa in Canada for unconfined release and livestock feed has met resistance from both organic and non-organic farmers. The glyphosate-resistant GE alfalfa will be sold under the trademarked Roundup Ready brand of crops created and distributed by Monsanto Canada. Glyphosate tolerance will allow farmers to use Monsanto's weed-killing Roundup. Alfalfa is important to any farmer's crop rotations.

Concerned with the effects GE alfalfa would have on alfalfa exports, Matthew Holmes, managing director of OTA in Canada, stated, "The introduction of genetically engineered alfalfa could irreparably harm export markets for both organic and non-organic alfalfa products."

The Canadian Biotechnology Network (CBAN) and the Saskatchewan Organic Directorate (SOD) immediately denounced the original 2005 approval by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA). Their joint position paper outlines the positive environmental impact of both traditionally and organically grown alfalfa, and the negative impact GE alfalfa would have on organic and non-organic agriculture and trade. They recommend that the Government of Canada rescind the approval and go further by banning the importation of GE alfalfa or GE contaminated alfalfa into Canada, and prohibiting testing, commercial release or any other introduction of GE alfalfa into Canada. This position has since been supported by more than 80 organizations.

Organic canola has been nearly eliminated by the aggressive spread of GE canola. Many fear the same fate for alfalfa, which plays a critical role in organic farming as a nitrogen-fixing rotation crop and livestock feed. Contamination would extend to bee products and livestock.

Because alfalfa, like canola, is bee-pollinated, and because the required buffer zones for GE crops are so small, there is little hope that GE alfalfa will be geographically contained or controllable.

Health Canada has deemed GE alfalfa safe for human and animal consumption, and CFIA has deemed it environmentally safe based on research submitted by Monsanto. The final step is approval at the Seed Variety Registration, which can take up to two years. SOD member Cathy Holtslander has identified this period as the final opportunity for stakeholders to pressure the federal government to prevent the final approval of GE alfalfa.

In addition to the political resistance building against GE alfalfa, scientific research is discrediting Monsanto's safety claims on GE alfalfa. Bagavathiannan (University of

Manitoba) and Van Acker (University of Guelph) have explored the potential spread of GE alfalfa, to address the claims made by the research cited by Monsanto and CFIA that buffers between GE alfalfa and organic alfalfa will prevent contamination of organic crops. They found cross-contamination occurs at distances up to 4 kilometers, and the CFIA approval did not consider the role of feral alfalfa growing wild along roadsides and in ditches. This independent information provides substantial evidence that GE alfalfa would spread and harm, if not destroy, the organic alfalfa market.

The driving force in the approval of this variety of GE alfalfa appears to be Monsanto's desire to increase sales of its Roundup brand of herbicides, pitting the potential market benefits of one against the current livelihoods of many.

If you wish to join OTA in opposition of the production of GE alfalfa in Canada, join the "No to GMO Alfalfa" campaign on the SOD web site ([www.saskorganic.com/oapf/](http://www.saskorganic.com/oapf/)).