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THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Ottawa rejects stronger export regulations for genetically modified crops

By JAMES BRADSHAW

From Thursday's Globe and Mail

But engineered crops are a fact of farming life, meeting at University of Guelph told

Parliament has voted down a bill that sought to strengthen regulatory laws that govern the export of genetically modified crops. But hours earlier in Guelph, Ont., leading minds in the study of the controversial agricultural technologies were already talking about how to control and promote fast-moving innovations in the field.

Manipulating genes to create genetically modified organisms (GMOs) has long provoked fiery debate between proponents and critics, who accuse scientists of "playing God" to produce "Frankenstein foods."

At the University of Guelph, one of the nation's most respected agriculture schools, the debate is more sanguine. Members of Parliament meeting with academics and industry stakeholders in Guelph on Wednesday heard that GMOs are a fact of agricultural life, and what matters is ensuring scientists and farmers are responsible in using them.

Food policy experts the world over - even in fields that are traditional enemies of genetic engineering - have turned their attention to the tricky challenge of managing with engineered crops rather than attempting to have them scrapped.

Alex Atamanenko, an NDP MP, renewed the debate last year by introducing C-474, a private member's bill that would have required a regulatory review of the potential harm to demand for Canadian exports of a particular GMO before its approval, on top of current examinations for its safety for feed, human consumption and environmental release.

The bill died on Wednesday evening by a vote of 178-98, after Conservative and Liberal MPs united to quash it.

Absent from the vote were several of Mr. Atamanenko's colleagues from Parliament's Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food, who had stopped for the meeting in Guelph as part of a cross-country tour exploring biotechnology. The MPs heard from academics and industry stakeholders, including Derek Penner, president of the Canadian arm of biotechnology giant Monsanto, who opposed the bill.

Their presence, along with the looming federal vote, drew nearly 100 protesters to the Guelph campus, brandishing signs with slogans such as, "I Vote No to GMO." The group was specifically targeting Enviropigs - genetically modified pigs created by the university to digest phosphorous in its feed differently than normal pigs in hopes that this would make them cheaper and easier for farmers to raise and better for the environment.

The pigs have yet to earn regulatory approval, and the protesters hope they never will.

"The biggest market potential we have for our products is in Europe right now, and Europeans do not want genetically engineered foods," said Sean McGivern, executive co-ordinator for the National Farmers Union, one of the protest organizers. "There's no reason for the Enviropig: good farmers with good management skills do not have phosphorous problems."

GMOs have been on the local market for about a decade, mostly corn, soya and canola. Canadians can consume them without knowing it because labelling laws do not force disclosure of GM content.

Proponents argue the modifications create higher yields, hardier crops and market advantages for farmers. Professor Peter Pauls, chair of the Department of Plant Agriculture at the University of Guelph, said farmers have already "embraced [them] big time," but often remain frustrated by the restrictive contracts dominant producers such as Monsanto and Syngenta insist on.

According to Manish Raizada, an associate professor in the same department who has worked on GMOs, many in the public realm still see genetic engineering as "evil," but the angry academic clashes of a decade ago have subsided.

"I think there's more consensus now," he said. "We have to be more sophisticated in our regulation."

Prof. Raizada advocates a two-tiered regulatory system. When scientific testing suggests a GMO's effect is benign, the approval process should be less strict than it is now. But those GMOs that appear potentially dangerous to humans or conventional crops should be subject to even more stringent reviews, he said.

Prof. Pauls said he accepts that considering global market concerns may be a valid next step, but said at that point, the discussion has left the scientific realm.

Federal Conservatives have consistently opposed Bill C-474, arguing farmers deserve access to innovative technology to be competitive.

"The defeat of this bill is good news for farmers," Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz said in a statement. "It is critical that our system remain based firmly in science, not politics."

Liberal MP Wayne Easter said the bill lacked depth and would have created undue uncertainty around biotechnology.

With a report from Jessica Leeder

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