

Gracia .Janes

This past spring environmentally concerned Canadians and farmers were jubilant, when agri-business giant Monsanto bowed to broad-based, world-wide, pressures and withdrew its application to market Round-Up-Ready wheat. Hold the cheers! Monsanto is part of another agri-industry push towards seed control, that according to the National Farmers Union, “threatens genetic diversity and a healthy and stable food supply.”

Under the auspices of the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, the Canadian Seed Trade Association and other industry groups eg Monsanto the Government of Canada is conducting a seed sector review. The National Farmers Union warns us that review recommendations may well force farmers to pay a royalty to corporations on farm-saved seeds. Rumor also hints at this royalty being tied to farmer eligibility for crop insurance.

For hundreds of years farmers have protected genetic resources i.e. seed stock, from year to year, and up until the 1990s, as the Farmers Union points out, this was “a public endeavor” with farmers able to “access new seed varieties at low cost.” The work, conducted by universities, Agriculture Canada facilities and volunteers across Canada, “helped preserve thousands of genetically diverse seeds.”

Drastic cuts to this important program over several years and a May /04 Supreme Court ruling that Saskatchewan farmer Percy Schmeiser had infringed Monsanto’s patent on genetically engineered canola (its cells and genes, but not the whole plant- which can’t be patented) are now combined to make a very unsteady base for the future of our seed diversity.

It also appears to mean a profitable time ahead for the agri-business sector. As Elbert van Donkersgoed, P.Ag. (hon.) Research Director of the Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario noted recently in his May/04 web-column Cornerpost “Granting a patent on plants indirectly through patents on cells and genes also covers the seed and its offspring for 20 years. This will result in a greater transfer of economic value from the business of farming to the biotechnology inventors that exists in other fields of invention.”

In 1988 National Council of Women of Canada urged the government of Canada to become a signatory to the FAO Convention of the Universality of Plant Genetic Resources; prepare a White Paper on Plant Breeders Rights, and initiate a full national debate on the subject; and to reject any changes in the present patent laws which would lead to the ownership of living organism.”

In June and December of 1992, Canada signed and ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity that came out of the Rio Earth Summit. This Convention’s objectives are “the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources.”

Canadians must be alert to the outcomes of the seed review, which may well show the world how hollow/or not Canada’s commitment is to the protection of its genetic diversity of seed resources

for present and future farmers and the public. (* NCWC Policy Update will follow in March)