

The Wheaten Garland of Peace

By Alex Jack

“As peace should still her wheaten garland wear. . .” Shakespeare, Hamlet

Following the war in Iraq, the future of the United Nations not only stood in jeopardy, but wheat, the traditional staff of life and emblem of peace on the UN flag, also hung in the balance. Over the winter, as the world was preoccupied with the buildup of American military forces in the Middle East and the debate in the Security Council intensified, Monsanto, the Darth Vader of the biotech industry, applied to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for approval of genetically modified (GM) wheat.

Last summer, the St. Louis based biotech giant publicly backed down from putting Roundup Ready Wheat (an herbicide-resistant variety) on a fast track after a prairie fire of opposition from farmers in the Great Plains, environmentalists, and consumers. At an industry summit conference in Oklahoma City, Monsanto publicly pledged not to introduce GM wheat for at least two years and until there was a viable market for it. U.S. Wheat Associates, the major trade association promoting American wheat exports, had taken a strong position against GM wheat. The vice president of General Mills, manufacturer of Wheaties, Cheerios, and other breakfast cereals, reported that consumers opposed it, and Amberwaves, a grassroots network devoted to preserving whole grains and keeping American beautiful, presented a petition signed by over 10,000 people opposing its release.

However, over the winter, Monsanto returned, with gene guns blazing, determined to force Roundup Ready wheat to market, regardless of widespread opposition, as the nation focused on the Persian Gulf crisis. At another wheat summit in Albuquerque, N.M. in February, Monsanto used its financial clout to “educate” a significant number of farmers, agricultural institutes, and research institutions to make an about face and support new biotech varieties. Industry officials ordered U.S. Wheat Associates not to release any further data on opposition to GM wheat.

A Prairie Rebellion

In North Dakota, heart of the wheat belt, a bill seeking to regulate GM varieties was rejected by lawmakers after Monsanto spread money around to universities and farmers. Two years ago, one house of the state legislature voted for a moratorium on GM wheat, but it was defeated when Monsanto threatened to stop funding for agricultural projects in the state altogether. Similar legislation in Montana also failed.

They’re trying to push a product there is no market for, Louis Kuster, North Dakota Wheat Commissioner, said. It is going to be devastating to our market for foreign wheat. The European Union, Egypt, and Japan, three of North America’s biggest foreign

customers have signaled that they not only will not buy GM wheat but will stop purchasing wheat from the U.S. and Canada altogether because of the threat of contamination. Agricultural experts forecast that the price of wheat will plunge up to 50% and cause widespread financial hardship to thousands of farmers and their families.

This spring several U.S. nonprofit organizations, including the Dakota Resource Council, National Family Farm Coalition, Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society, and the Center for Food Safety, filed a legal petition to the USDA. Seeking compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act, Migratory Bird Treat Act, and the Plant Protection Act, the petition asks for a moratorium on the commercial introduction of GM wheat pending a comprehensive environmental impact statement on the potential for the development of herbicide resistant weeds, adverse impacts on social ecology, adverse impacts of pollinators, adverse impacts on migratory birds that use wheat fields and habitats and food sources, and contamination of existing non-GM wheat seeds with GM traits.

The petition also calls for assessments of the potential loss of U.S. wheat exports, the potential loss of organic wheat production, the effects of increased seed prices to wheat farmers, and the listing of GM wheat varieties on the federal noxious wheat list.

In North Dakota, organic wheat grower Donald Vig predicted that the introduction of GM wheat would ultimately force him out of business. Organic farming is crop rotation. You eliminate enough crops in the rotation and you don't have a farm anymore. Vig was forced to stop growing soybeans when his neighbors started to grow Roundup Ready varieties.

Nobody has really found out if this stuff is safe, noted Steven Pollestad, another North Dakota farmer. The foreign buyers have flat out said they won't buy it. And I believe they won't. In a letter to the Grand Forks Herald, he explained that Monsanto had violated its go-slow promise and asked state legislators to allow the public a voice in the decision to allow GM crops. Or, we could let Monsanto decide, he wrote. And maybe we also could get Enron to run our utilities and Arthur Andersen to keep the books.

We have had drought, hail, floods. But none of these natural disasters can compare with the potential devastating effects of the introduction of GM wheat, observed Helen Waller, who has grown wheat in eastern Montana for 50 years.

USDA: An Unlikely Ally

In response to farmer dissatisfaction, the USDA announced that it may impose strict requirements on Monsanto to guarantee that it upheld its pledge not to sell biotech wheat until foreign markets accepted it. American wheat exporters currently market their crops to foreign buyers with assurances from the USDA that no GM wheat is currently licensed in the U.S.

If we are going to continue to issue a statement, we need assurances that statement is correct, David Shipman, deputy administrator for the USDA's Federal Grain Inspection Service, explained. He said that the USDA may require Monsanto to agree to independent audits from the top all the way down to ensure that no GM wheat was sold. In surprisingly strong language, Shipman said the company would also need to sign an annual statement pledging not to commercialize biotech varieties and provide information for DNA testing by the USDA or face felony charges.

The threat to American agriculture is especially ominous. Grown by about 250,000 farmers, wheat is the nation's number one grain for domestic consumption and leading export to foreign countries. Farmers fear that GM wheat would inevitably contaminate natural varieties of wheat in the way that soy, corn, and rapeseed have been compromised in recent years. DNA testing by independent laboratories indicates that up to 75% of conventional and organic soy, corn, and rapeseed have been polluted. Native varieties of maize in Mexico, in the heart of the ancient Mayan empire, have already been undermined.

As the foundation of the U.S. Food Guide Pyramid (eat 6 to 11 servings of whole grains daily), the decline of natural wheat, rice, and other essential foods represents the greatest possible threat to American security and planetary health and peace. Grain fields constitute the largest sanctuary for biodiversity of any crops in the world, sheltering hundreds of species of birds, mammals, reptiles, and tiny insects.

New biotech grains will inevitably contaminate the natural food supply, stretching back to ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and other civilizations. Medical and scientific studies of similar GM crops, pesticides, and estrogen-disrupting chemicals suggest that Monsanto's Roundup Ready wheat could potentially lead to a higher risk of allergies, infertility, and other disorders and increase the level of violence in society, especially among children. The effects on migrating birds, butterflies, and other wildlife have prompted the Sierra Club to make conserving natural wheat a top priority.

The effects on personal and family health, as well as the environment and global consciousness, will be incalculable. New biotech wheat will inevitably contaminate the conventional and organic food supply and lead to the end of natural bread, noodles, pasta, spaghetti, lasagna, pizza, pies, cakes, cookies, bagels, seitan, beer, soy sauce, and other products made from wheat.

Opposition Mounts

At the end of May, the Canadian Wheat Board asked Monsanto to withdraw its application for regulatory approval to prevent significant and predictable economic harm.

The marketing issues have not been sufficiently addressed. Prior to commercialization of biotech wheat they need to be defined and acted upon, North American Export Grain Association president Gary Martin stated.

Recently, U.S.-based food companies have also voiced their opposition, assuring farmers they will not allow the wheat to enter their grain elevators, flour mills, or bakeries. Betsy Faga, president of the North American Millers' Association, a trade group, said that "Greenpeace and other activists out there on this issue . . . could change consumer attitudes on a dime.

As the traditional Staff of Life, wheat (and rice) have nourished our ancestors, grandparents, and children. It is essential that the wheaten garland of peace be preserved for future generations.

Alex Jack is a teacher, author, and president of Amberwaves.

© 2003 by Alex Jack. This article may be reprinted for educational, noncommercial uses.

© Amberwaves, 2003