

Opinion Editorial by Percy Schmeiser

"WHO OWNS THE SEEDS?"

The U.S. government is convening a ministerial-level Conference on Agricultural Science and Technology in Sacramento, California, June 23-25. I will also be coming to Sacramento, but not to participate in the conference. Rather, I will be there to speak with ministers, elected officials, activists and community members about my opposition to the biotechnology agenda of the U.S. government and the biotech industry being advanced in Sacramento.

According to the USDA, the conference will "focus on the critical role science and technology can play in raising agricultural productivity in developing countries," and to "broaden participants' knowledge and understanding of relevant science and technology, including biotechnology..."

As a fifth generation farmer in Canada who has been growing canola for over forty years, I consider myself quite knowledgeable about agricultural productivity. And as a farmer who is being sued by the Monsanto Corporation for nearly \$200,000 for "stealing" their bioengineered seeds, I know significantly more than I ever intended to about biotechnology.

As my family has done for generations, I grow crops by saving the seeds from one year's harvest to use in the next. This practice is known as "seed saving." When we share the seeds with other farmers, it's "seed sharing," and when we trade seeds, it's "seed trading." Where we see a traditional, communal, sustainable technique practiced by farmers for millennia, multinational biotech corporations see big bucks.

Farmers who use Monsanto's Roundup Ready canola, which is bioengineered to contain a gene that protects the crop from the herbicide Roundup, must sign a contract with Monsanto promising that they will buy new seed from Monsanto every year. They can not save, share, or trade their seeds. The seeds, in other words, belong to Monsanto, not to the farmer.

I have learned the hard way that one of the main problems with genetically engineered (GE) crops is that it is impossible to keep them from spreading to non-GE fields. The seeds get blown by wind or from passing trucks, they can get mixed with non-GE crops by accident, or any other number of forms of cross-contamination can occur. This is what happened to me.

In 1998, private investigators from Monsanto trespassed on my land to collect samples from my fields. They found Roundup Ready canola. I never put those plants on my land, but they claim to have found them there anyway. Now they are suing me for stealing their seed. I am just one among more than 475 lawsuits that Monsanto has filed against farmers under similar charges.

In addition to growing canola, I have been a canola seed developer for fifty years and had developed my own special varieties. This work was all destroyed through contamination and pollution from Monsanto. Now Monsanto has my developed seed and I suspect that they are using it in their further development of canola seeds. Basically, the right to use our own seed has been taken away. The question is, where do Monsanto's rights end and mine begin?

Monsanto wanted to settle out of court, but I refused and instead launched a counter suit. Last month, the Supreme Court of Canada announced it would hear my appeal. I'm continuing this fight for myself, but also for the majority of farmers, particularly those in developing countries who can not afford Monsanto's seeds and the chemical inputs needed to grow them. If GE seeds get into their fields, what are they going to do? What rights do they have?

Dependence on the biotech industry is the opposite of food security and safety. It is a monopoly that must be opposed in Sacramento and everywhere else that it is proposed. ✪

Percy Schmeiser is a fifth generation canola farmer from Saskatchewan, Canada, who has been sued by the Monsanto Corporation for illegally using their "Roundup Ready" seeds. The Canadian Supreme Court will hear the case next year.