

years of local farming knowledge behind the folk varieties of brinjal by sharing any “benefits”, can the loss of pure, natural, genetically untampered-with indigenous varieties be reversed or recompensed? Most of all, can large corporations backed by their governments be allowed to take over farming?

There was also a series of “transfers” and “approvals”, which happened with characteristic lack of transparency. In 2007, India’s National Biodiversity Authority (NBA), which became the main decision-making authority under India’s Biological Diversity Act, 2002, gave clearance to Mahyco to import parental

lines from Bangladesh and then to send back the material to East West Seeds Bangladesh Ltd for seed distribution. The company has operations in Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines. In other words, the NBA actually authorised a multinational company to use Indian germplasm to develop a GM product that would not only be used in India but also exported to India’s neighbours, endangering Asia’s biodiversity.

Some farmers believe that Mahyco’s offer to “provide the technology free of cost” to the NARS is nothing less than a ploy by the GM industry to penetrate the NARS and to leave farmers with little

option but accept Mahyco’s products. For all the talk of the benefits of Bt brinjal, farmers clearly see that the introduction of this first GM food crop would start a process that would seriously jeopardise India’s food and farm systems and the biodiversity that sustains them. They are determined to struggle against it. 

Update: On 9 February 2010, in response to the widespread concern expressed by the public and some scientists, Jairam Ramesh, Minister of Environment and Forests, announced an indefinite moratorium on the release of Bt-brinjal.

Contaminated Canadian flax barred from Europe

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In September 2009, farmers in Canada were shocked to learn that their flax (linseed) exports were contaminated with genetically modified (GM) flax. The timing could not have been worse: just as farmers began their harvest, companies in Europe began detecting GM flax contamination, and the European market was closed to Canadian flax. It is not unusual to have crops contaminated by their GM equivalents, but this particular contamination was wholly unexpected because it has been illegal to sell GM flax seed in Canada since 2001.

Flax seeds are used in food products such as baked goods and muesli, and for animal feed. On 8 September, a German cereals company reported contamination through the European Commission’s Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed. Contamination reports multiplied in the following weeks, and by mid-November Japan became the 35th country where contaminated flax was found or where products containing contaminated flax were reported to have been distributed. (Canada and the US are the only countries in the world that have approved GM flax for growing and eating.)

Eight years ago, Canadian farmers themselves fought to have GM flax seed taken off the market, knowing that their European sales – Europe takes 60 per cent of Canada’s flax exports – would be destroyed if GM contamination occurred. The situation is complicated in Canada because GM flax is not actually banned on the domestic market.

As there is no mechanism in Canada by which farmers can get a GM crop taken off the approved list or removed from

the market on economic grounds, the farmers had to find another way to stop GM flax. Flax is one of the crops in Canada that requires variety registration prior to commercial sale of seeds, so in 2001 flax farmers sought – and obtained – the deregistration of GM flax seeds. At the time, 40 seed growers were multiplying 200,000 bushels of GM seed for future demand. As this seed could no longer be sold legally, the authorities ordered the crushing of all the seeds. Despite their efforts, eight years later the farmers’ worst fears have come true. “This is an absolute nightmare for flax growers; it’s why we worked so hard to have GM flax removed”, said Terry Boehm, a flax grower and President of the National Farmers Union in Canada.

The GM flax (tolerant to herbicide residues in soil) was developed in the 1990s by controversial scientist and industry proponent Alan McHughen, when he worked for the Crop Development Centre (CDC) at the University of Saskatchewan. McHughen called GM flax “CDC Triffid”, in reference to John Wyndham’s 1951 horror novel, *The Day of the Triffids*, which features terrifying flesh-eating plants farmed for oil. The flax was developed with public money through provincial government funding to the CDC – obviously without a mandate from farmers. However, the CDC halted its GM research after the flax controversy, which included a public fight with farmers over McHughen’s practice of passing out GM flax seed packets at public presentations.

Canada is the world’s leader in the production and export of flax, which is one of Canada’s five major cash crops, along with wheat, barley, oats and canola. The

price of flax fell 32 per cent before GM contamination had even been confirmed. Farmers don’t yet know how widespread the contamination is or how it happened. It’s likely, however, as in all cases of contamination, that farmers will bear the costs of the clean-up. Canadian farmers are now having to send their flax seed for testing – at C\$105 (US\$100) per test.

Canadian industry continues to see Europe’s zero-tolerance policy as the problem, not the contamination itself. Industry and the government are using the contamination incident to press again for an end to zero-tolerance.

The Canadian government has remained silent about the contamination domestically, not wanting to draw attention to the issue, but in February 2010 a Bill will be debated in Canada’s Parliament that would require an assessment of export-market harm before GM seeds are sold in Canada. 

1 GM flax contamination has reached the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Luxembourg, Mauritius, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Romania, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, United Kingdom.

You can see a profile of Alan McHughen at: www.spinprofiles.org/index.php/Alan_McHughen

For updates and more information: www.cban.ca/flax

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