A TALE OF TWO SEED FARMERS: ORGANIC VS. ENGINEERED

Moving Toward Compromise

In December, officials at the U.S. Department of Agriculture floated a proposal they hoped could ease some of the ill will between organic farmers and farmers who grow genetically engineered crops. The proposal would allow farmers once again to plant genetically engineered alfalfa, after a court-imposed moratorium on it that has lasted almost four years. But it would restrict the areas in which farmers could grow the crop. Neither side was enthusiastic about it.

Under the proposal, which could be adopted as early as this week, entire counties in nine Western states where alfalfa seed is grown would be declared off-limits for genetically engineered alfalfa — except for carefully controlled production of seed. This would reduce the odds of cross-pollination with alfalfa seed being grown for organic farmers.

Biotech companies and farm groups accused the USDA of ignoring its own science, since the agency has concluded that genetically engineered alfalfa is completely safe. The organic industry, for its part, called the proposal a step in the right direction but demanded additional measures to protect organic growers from contamination.

Some of the leading companies in the organic industry, meanwhile, have been pursuing their own form of pragmatic coexistence. They have formed a “Non-GMO Project” that is drafting standards for food that can be labeled as “non-GMO” — not genetically modified, or genetically engineered. Under these standards, GMO presence would be minimized, but not eliminated. Organic corn that’s used as animal feed by producers of organic meat or eggs, for instance, might contain up to 0.9 percent GMOs. The GMO content of corn chips for human consumption, however, would be limited to 0.5 percent. - Dan Charles

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The Cold War phrase “peaceful coexistence” has been revived in a new context: as a potential solution in the clash between organic agriculture and genetic engineering.

This agricultural battle is global in scope, but one place where the tension is most tangible — and where its consequences are most concrete — is the valley along Oregon’s Willamette River.

This valley is a wonderful place to grow things; the soil is fertile and the climate is mild. Settlers who arrived here via the Oregon Trail once called it “Eden.”

Farmers here can grow almost any crop, and the valley has become a global center of seed production: Seeds for cabbage, spinach, Swiss chard, beets, grass and many other crops are harvested here and shipped all over the world.

Since seeds are genetic packages, it is perhaps unsurprising that a battle erupted when some of these farmers started growing genetically engineered sugar beets a few years ago. The beets have a new gene, created in the laboratory, which allows them to tolerate the weedkiller Roundup.

On one side of the battle is organic farmer Frank Morton, a relative newcomer to the Willamette Valley’s farming community. He grew up in West Virginia, but moved to Oregon in the 1970s to go to college. “This valley is not big enough to have genetically engineered crops and normal crops
growing together without cross contamination happening,” he says.

On the other side is Tim Winn, who has lived and worked on the same farm his whole life, on the banks of the Willamette River just northeast of Corvallis. Winn says government scientists have concluded that there is nothing dangerous in the new gene, and thus no novel risk for Morton or his customers to worry about.

“We can invent a perceived risk in our mind; a lot of us do,” Winn says. “And if the science doesn’t support it, then it’s not a risk. And I guess if [Morton] wants to stay in business with those customers, it would be in his interest to educate them.”

The standoff between these two farmers raises a question: Can genetically engineered crops and organic farms can be good neighbors, no matter where they are grown?

Concerns Of Cross-Pollination

To understand why the tension exists, I visited the farm where Morton grows his organic seeds: Gathering Together Farm, outside the town of Philomath. Morton takes me on a tour of the fields, showing off enclosures for growing vegetables in winter, piles of compost, and fields of cabbage, arugula, turnips and kale. We stop and get out at a field of chard.

This chard, Morton explains, is actually the same species as beets. They’re all Beta vulgaris, the way black Labradors and golden retrievers are all dogs. So anyone growing these plants for seed has a special concern: windblown pollen.

Those different plants will cross-pollinate, so if you want to produce high-quality chard seed, you do not want beet pollen blowing into your field, either from a neighbor’s field or from stray plants along a nearby road. And pollen can blow for miles.

As it happens, there’s a sugar beet seed grower straight across the fields a couple of miles away, Morton says. This has not, until now, become a problem.

“Apparently they aren’t finding any of my red chard or golden chard seed in their sugar beets, and I’m not finding any of their genetics in mine. That I know of,” Morton says. “There’s always some question, and that’s the problem — there’s always some question.”

The Willamette Valley Specialty Seed Association has a system for avoiding cross-pollination, and the approach is charmingly low-tech: just a map of the valley with a lot of pins stuck in it to show where each seed crop is planted. For farmers, it’s first come, first served — if you “pin” a sugar beet field, nobody else is supposed to grow seed for Swiss chard within three miles.

George Burt, the former manager of the West Coast Beet Seed Co. in Salem, Ore., helped set up this system before he retired.

“You’re really trying to minimize the risk,” he says. “And you can get it down to the point where you’re relatively sure that you’re not hurting anybody else and nobody’s hurting you.”

But seed growers agree: It’s almost impossible to guarantee that absolutely no cross-fertilization will ever happen.

Finding Common Ground

Organic grower Morton didn’t worry about this until farmers in the valley started growing genetically engineered sugar beets. For him, those man-made genes are different and require different rules. Morton wants a guarantee that pollen from those genetically engineered beets will not fertilize his chard or red beets. If it did, he says, it would violate his organic principles — and it would destroy his business because his customers wouldn’t buy his seeds anymore.

In fact, he says, just the possibility of contamination is starting to hurt.
"We think that buyers from overseas — organic seed companies — we think they have already started to avoid buying from us," he says.

So Morton, together with some environmental groups, went to court and won.

A federal judge banned the planting of “Roundup Ready” sugar beets until the USDA does an environmental impact study that examines the economic consequences of cross-pollination, especially for organic farmers. In a similar case, another judge demanded the same thing for genetically engineered alfalfa.

Listening to Morton and Winn, there doesn’t seem to be an easy solution.

Morton says his business cannot survive the presence of genetically engineered crops, often called GMOs.

"It will be a valley fit for growing GMOs, but won’t be a valley where people from Europe and Japan and Korea come to have seed grown," he says.

And on the other side, Winn says Morton’s demands could unnecessarily cripple a valuable industry.

"Quite honestly, if you regulate this valley to the point where you don’t have sugar beet seed production, or production of some other major commodities — that’s a huge deal!" Winn says.

There is one voice calling for compromise: Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack released an open letter last month calling for a “new paradigm of coexistence and cooperation” between the two sides. Giving in a little, Vilsack said, would be better than litigation that puts one side or the other out of business.

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