

Council discussed a proposed ban on growing GM crops in Richmond at a General Purpose Committee meeting last week. Due to procedural delays, council only received detailed information regarding international evidence around the science of GMO's during the meeting. Consequently, there was insufficient time for councilors to review the relevant science before voting.

The result of the vote indicates that few councilors were familiar with legitimate and generally accepted global scientific opinion on GMO's prior to making a decision on the issue. The result of the vote can be attributed to a lack of knowledge and feelings of fear perpetuated by unsubstantiated allegations and emotionally charged pseudo-science. In fact, the science of GMO's is very clear and absolutely overwhelming, which is why world expert opinion continues to support the safety of GM crops and food.

The main reasons for the proposed GE-Free resolution appear to be alleged threats to organic farmers and alleged health issues. I would like to address each of these concerns.

First let me address the threat to organic certification. The most widely quoted example of a farmer losing his crop to the presence of trace amounts of GMO's is Canadian farmer Percy Schmeiser. His case was tried at all three levels of the Canadian Court System. All three courts, including the Supreme Court of Canada, found him guilty of planting over 1000 acres of RR canola in seven fields. Since that situation does not represent what the average person would consider "trace amounts", using his story as an example of the threat to organic farmers fails to strengthen the argument against GM crops.

The past 16 years have seen the production of both GM crops and organic food increase exponentially. Supporters of tonight's resolution and a council member have repeatedly stated (including on Television) the presence of trace amounts of GM pollen or seeds in any organic crop will result in de-certification. After 16 years of gains in both GM crops and organic food production there is not a single case of an organic farmer losing certification for trace amounts of GM content.

Further the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movement (IFOAM) :

“Organic farmers should not have to prove their crops are uncontaminated... “Contamination that results from circumstances beyond the control of the operator will not necessarily alter the organic status of the operation. The level of such unavoidable contamination will range from non-detectable to very low, depending on a number of factors, most of them outside the control of the producers. Any defined threshold will be chosen arbitrarily and does not reflect adherence to organic principles. Therefore IFOAM does not support the introduction of de minimis thresholds for genetic contamination. Because of this, mandatory testing for genetic contamination should not be introduced for the verification of organic production. “

In keeping with this statement by the global organic farming umbrella organization, there is no farm-level testing of organic crops in North America at present.

I ask this council now to acknowledge that there is NO threat to organic agriculture from GMO's.

The second perceived issue relates to food safety. I have submitted to council an array of global scientific opinion on the safety of GM crops and food, all of which state GM crops are as safe as or safer than food from conventionally bred plants. Critics of GMO technology have cited a couple of Greenpeace sponsored researchers who have repeatedly claimed to have demonstrated harm from GM crops. The European Food Safety Authority in its 55th Plenary Meeting of the Scientific Panel on GMO's Jan 2010 stated:

The GMO Panel concludes that the authors' claims, regarding new side effects indicating kidney and liver toxicity, are not supported by the data provided in their paper. There is no new information that would lead it to reconsider its previous opinions which concluded that there were no indications of adverse effects for human, animal health and the environment.

This council heard these exact allegations of harms stated as fact last week. They are not fact. This very clear statement from the European Food Safety Authority

shows how poor science can be used to generate a great deal of fear in those not trained in the discipline.

To date there is not a single documented case of harm from consuming GM food anywhere in the world. Many will try to convince this council otherwise but their claims have all been demonstrated false. So says every World Food Safety Authority.

Now I would like to look at the opposite side of this debate for a moment, the implied superiority and safety of organic food. Organic food relies on manure as a primary fertilizer. Manure contains many pathogenic bacteria that can and do cause disease and death. Recent history is a prime example. Research was clear when it stated:

“The percentages of E.coli–positive samples in conventional and organic produce were 1.6 and 9.7%, respectively... Organic lettuce had the largest prevalence of E. coli (22.4%) compared with other produce types. Organic samples from farms that used manure or compost aged less than 12 months had a prevalence of E. coli 19 times greater than that of farms that used older materials.

Further, it is also well documented pathogenic bacteria can and do get inside the plant tissues so cannot be washed off. These are some of the reasons why the safety track record of organic food is less than ideal. Here are just a very few examples.

In 2007 Organic spinach was contaminated with E.coli 0157:H7. Hundreds were made sick and three people died in Canada and the US.

In 2011 “pesticide free” cantaloupe infected hundreds of people in the US and 30 people died.

Last summer saw a huge tragedy in Europe. E.coli contamination of Organic bean sprouts sickened over 3000 people and killed 60 people. Many of the survivors will have kidney damage for life.

As we speak there is a recall of organic spinach for Salmonella contamination.

Unfortunately I do not have time to go into the issues of fungal toxin levels in food and their effects on the unborn. Again organic food does not fare well in comparisons.

These facts are not in dispute and should bring pause to anyone who thinks organic food is safer than other types of food. History shows that not to be the case.

The reason I bring up the documented health issues of organic food is not to criticize organic farming or people who prefer to choose organic food. I am simply demonstrating that organic food is not safer than other types of food and definitely not safer than GM food.

The apparent considerations behind the proposed GE-Free by-law do not stand up to scrutiny.

The facts are:

- After three trillion meals containing GM ingredients, there is not a single documented case of harm.

- No type of food production is risk free and organic food is no exception.

- De-certification of Canadian organic farmers from trace amounts of GM crops has never occurred, including during the period of exponential growth in both organic and GM crop production. GM crops do not threaten people's choice of organic food. Both types of agriculture have flourished in Canada and this is very unlikely to change in the future.

Developing policies that run counter to these facts is not in the best interest of the City of Richmond.

The global reality is that the world will need 50% more food in the coming decades and we do not have the luxury of rejecting any type of food production for ideological reasons. From organic to conventional to Integrated Pest Management to GMO's, we will need them all,

This year saw the developing world pass the Western world in acres of GM crops. China is poised to become the world leader in GM crop technology. The future of global agriculture will include GM crops.

Organic food represents ~3% of the food consumed in Canada. This proposed by-law would favour a small but vocal minority of producers at the expense of the vast majority.

I will leave you with the words of a first time councilor in Nanaimo. "As a city councilor it is my job to make evidence based decisions, not decisions based on just my moral beliefs. There is a place for morality, but evidence should always supersede."

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