

Bill C-474 The Final Debate

The final debate on Bill C-474 - set to be an unprecedented 5 hours! - is currently scheduled for February 7th in the House of Commons. The final vote will follow a few days later. These dates can change.

This is a unique opportunity for your Member of Parliament to participate in the debate on genetically engineered foods, crops and animals. Please write to your MP today and ask them to express your concerns during the debate. Up to 35 MPs may be able to speak in the debate and we need a strong discussion. You can write to your MP instantly from <http://www.cban.ca/474action> Please feel free to use any text from the below article in your letter.

Please see below an article from CBAN with the latest updates and analysis. Thank you for your continued concern and action!

A win for Bill C-474: NDP secures extended debate on GE crops by Lucy Sharratt, Common Ground magazine, January 2011, http://www.commonground.ca/iss/234/cg234_billC474.shtml

For the first time, Parliament is engaged in a real debate over the negative impacts of genetically engineered (GE) food and crops (also known as genetically modified, GM). This debate is thanks to the one-line Private Members Bill C-474, which would require “an analysis of potential harm to export markets be conducted before the sale of any new genetically engineered seed is permitted.”

Despite industry attempts to prevent the debate from happening in the first place and a successful move to shut down Agriculture Committee hearings on the Bill, Bill C-474 continues to force more debate in both the House of Commons and the Agriculture Committee.

The Bill identifies the core problem of GE crops being approved in Canada despite predicted negative economic impacts. GE contamination translates into economic costs borne by farmers, especially when GE crops are introduced without also being approved in our major export markets. However, these economic risks are not considered before GE crops are approved. If Bill C-474 passes, it will likely prevent the planting of crops that we know will cause economic chaos, such as GE alfalfa and wheat.

Kelvin Einarson, director and secretary treasurer of the Manitoba Forage Seed

Association, spoke at the Agriculture Committee hearings in June, stating, “Bill C-474 is the first step in offering some protection in the future for Canadian family farms. Market acceptance must be made part of the evaluation process and incorporated into the Seeds Regulation Act.”

Introduced by Alex Atamanenko, NDP Agriculture Critic and MP for BC Southern Interior, C-474 is the first Private Members Bill on genetic engineering to get this far in the Parliamentary process. The fight over the Bill is happening at the exact time the struggle to stop GE alfalfa is reaching a critical stage. The Bill could be voted on in early February, at the same time GE alfalfa could be approved in the US.

The New Democratic Party and the Bloc Quebecois are strong supporters of the Bill. The Conservative Party, however, despite depending upon a rural constituent base, is solidly pro-GE and is actively opposing the Bill. If Bill C-474 dies, it will be because the Liberal Party is not willing to support it and risk the ire of the biotech industry. Regardless of what happens to the Bill itself, the debate has exposed MPs to evidence of harm caused by GE crops and strong concern from voters.

The first big victory in the life of Bill C-474 was a vote in the House of Commons in April when a majority of MPs voted in favour of the Bill, sending it on to the Agriculture Committee for study. The biotechnology industry lobbied hard to stop this debate from even taking place so this vote was a victory for democracy. The House of Commons Agriculture Committee held hearings on Bill C-474 in June and heard critical testimony from alfalfa growers.

GM crisis for organics

Alfalfa growers do not need nor want GM alfalfa and have been trying to stop it for at least five years. The introduction of Monsanto’s GE herbicide tolerant (Roundup Ready) alfalfa would have serious negative impacts on many different types of farmers and farming systems, both conventional and organic. Without Bill C-474, there is no mechanism to even ask the question of what the economic cost of introducing GE alfalfa will be. Because alfalfa is a perennial crop pollinated by bees, GE contamination is inevitable. Alfalfa is used as pasture and high-protein feed for animals like dairy cows, beef cattle, lambs and pigs and is also used to build up nutrients in the soil, making it particularly important for organic farming. If introduced, GE alfalfa would ruin export markets for alfalfa products and threaten the future of organic food and farming in North America.

GE alfalfa was actually approved in Canada in 2005, but it must go through one more

small, easy step before it can be legally sold as seed. In the US, GE alfalfa is also currently illegal, although this could change as soon as the end of January. On December 16, the U.S. Department of Agriculture released its final Environmental Impact Statement on GE alfalfa and with classic anti-democratic timing, triggered a 30-day final public comment period starting on December 23. The US could decide to allow GE alfalfa before the spring, assuring contamination in Canada.

Protecting the biotech industry

After the powerful testimony of alfalfa growers against GE alfalfa, and in support of Bill C-474, the biotech industry succeeded in shutting down the Agriculture Committee hearings. On October 27, a procedural motion to extend Committee hearings on Bill C-474 was defeated by the Conservatives and Liberals. This decision to abruptly end the hearings resulted in scheduled Committee witnesses, including National Farmers Union President Terry Boehm, being turned away from Parliament Hill on the morning of October 28. Boehm, a canola farmer, had travelled, on a ticket paid for by the Committee, from Saskatchewan at harvest time to testify in support of the Bill. The motion to extend the hearings was defeated by just five votes because too few Liberals were in the House at the time.

Public pressure to support the Bill has been so strong, however, that, while escaping more hearings on the Bill, the Liberals and Conservatives took action so they could tell constituents they were still examining the controversial issue. They introduced a joint motion to start a new study on biotechnology: "That the Standing Committee on Agriculture & Agri-food conduct a study on the status of the Canadian biotechnology sector, in which it travels to the universities across Canada where this technology is primarily being undertaken, and that it recommend, where necessary, legislative, policy and regulatory changes in order to foster an innovative and fertile biotechnology industry in Canada."

The study is clearly not designed to ask farmers for their views but will instead provide the industry a public relations platform. In early February, Committee members will travel to Calgary, Saskatoon, Guelph (ON), Quebec, Charlottetown (PEI) and Truro (NS). It is possible that Bill C-474 could be debated and voted on in the House of Commons while Agriculture Committee members are on the road listening to pro-GE researchers tell them how can support the biotechnology industry.

A win for democracy

In a surprise move on December 1 in the House of Commons, the New Democratic

Party used an obscure rule to secure an extended debate on Bill C-474, of up to five hours for early in 2011. In our 15-year history with GE crops, a five-hour debate in the House of Commons on the issue is unprecedented. Now, every MP will have an opportunity to speak to the issue. "This is a great chance for farmers to be heard. Organic, non-GE and conventional farmers will all now have a fair opportunity to voice their urgent concerns," said Saskatchewan organic grain farmer Arnold Taylor.

Even if the Bill is not passed, the debate and the public pressure around it has been a huge victory for democracy. The Bill has finally forced the Liberal Party to acknowledge that there is a problem that needs to be dealt with. As Wayne Easter, Liberal Agriculture Critic said in the House on December 1, there is a serious concern that I think Parliament or Agriculture Canada or someone, certainly, has to address; that is... that there is potential risk in the alfalfa industry by the introduction of GMO, genetically engineered seeds. It would be the same in terms of the wheat industry, over a slightly longer term."

The question now is, will the Liberal Party be part of the solution? The Liberals might vote down Bill C-474, but they have not brought forward any other concrete proposal. Who in our government – Parliament or Agriculture Canada or someone – will take the necessary leadership to actually stop harmful GE crops?

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Lucy Sharratt is the Coordinator for the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network. Take action on Bill C474 at www.cban.ca/474

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