ADDRESSING MARKET ACCESS OF NEW AGRICULTURAL BIOTECHNOLOGIES

With approximately 80 per cent of Canadians saying they support biotechnology, the outlook for farmers to play a significant role in addressing some of the world's most pressing challenges is good.

That's important because today's challenges– like food shortages in developing countries and concerns about energy and the environment – are only going to increase as the world population rises to over 9 billion in a few short decades.

While consumer acceptance in Canada – and indeed in many countries – is high, Canadian farmers and exporters face other challenges to ensure Canadian biotech crops are able to move into foreign markets.

For example the European Union recently restricted shipments of a Canadian crop after trace amounts of genetically modified material were found, despite the fact the material in question had been approved for human consumption under Canada's internationally respected science-based regulatory system.

This scenario is likely to become increasingly common because technology is so advanced the low level presence of just one genetically modified seed in a sample of 10,000 can be detected, making Canadian exporters vulnerable to extreme and unwarranted financial burdens.

This is why industry provides the leadership required to navigate the complex market systems currently in place by seeking simultaneous approvals for new technologies in countries Canadian crops will likely be destined for; by conducting pre-market testing to assess potential market impacts early in the research stage and; by working through trade negotiations to determine a universal policy on low-level presence to reduce trade friction.

Members of CropLife Canada, the trade association representing the developers, manufacturers and distributors of plant science innovations, have committed to a series of policies to evaluate the potential for new technologies to hit road blocks on their way to export markets and identify ways to minimize these risks. CropLife Canada calls these market analysis principles.

By looking at the risks as well as the benefits and opportunities associated with new technologies, industry is assessing the ability for new technologies not only to be successfully produced, but also adopted and exported. Also crucial is industry's work to develop options to address potential risks and communicating with key stakeholders to allay concerns in potential export markets – something which fits well with industry's practice of seeking regulatory approvals in major export markets prior to bringing new traits to market.

One example of this in action comes from the Canola Council of Canada. With genetic modification innovations present in approximately 85 per cent of all Canadian canola, the council recognizes the importance of being responsible about the introduction of new technologies.

The council knows crops developed using biotechnology are regulated, and as such its industry must pay particular attention to the regulatory requirements in its export markets. To ensure new canola technology can be introduced effectively and economically, the council encourages developers to use CropLIfe Canada's market analysis principles before commercializing new technology. Companies meet applicable regulatory requirements in key export markets.

As the ability to detect even the most minute traces of material increases, the international community must come to terms with the idea that zero-tolerance is not realistic.

To minimize trade disruptions that could have severe financial implications for industries in both the country of export and the country of import, Canada's plant science industry supports all efforts to establish an international food safety standard for low level presence of genetically modified materials safe for food and encourages the federal government to make this a key issue for future trade discussions with the European Union.

Ensuring Canadian farmers can export the products they grow is a serious issue. Canada's plant biotechnology companies are aware of how important this issue is and have take steps to address it so the benefits of the latest innovations can be fully realized both here at home and in our foreign markets.

For more on Canadian plant biotechnology, visit www.croplife.ca / www.whybiotech.ca

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