

Iowa Bills Fight GM Free Zones and Farmer Choice

Whenever large agribusiness or their political representatives come up with a new farm strategy to save local farmers, watch out. It seems that more small farmers suffer while agribusiness prospers. The latest proposal is a bill before Iowa legislators that would prevent local jurisdictions from creating identity preservation zones.

Using identity preservation (IP), farmers keep crop varieties separate from others to meet purity requirements of their buyers. Iowa farmers, for example, may earn an extra \$8.50 – \$15.50 per bushel for organic soybeans. Non-GM beans bring in about \$.50 more than GM varieties, and non-GM food grade raise that to \$2.00. Several specialty varieties comprise the approximately 5 percent of total US corn acreage that is IP, including an extractable starch corn grown for Japanese breweries by 60 southeast Iowa farmers.

While low commodity corn and soybean prices contributed to the 22 percent reduction of Iowa's mid-size farms between 1997 and 2002, IP niche marketing keeps many profitable. IP crops also can bypass the "normal" big agribusiness marketing channels.

Contamination is a key challenge to IP growers. Unwanted varieties may cross-pollinate or get mixed up in the seed, harvest equipment, or during storage and transport. Some farm regions create entire zones that exclude unwanted varieties, where all the farms, and if possible all collection and distribution points, only handle approved grain.

The current bills before the Iowa house (HF 202) and senate (1144) would disallow local jurisdictions from regulating the sale or production of seeds. The reason? They are trying to prevent Iowa farmers from creating GM-free zones. These zones, which do not allow the cultivation of genetically modified crops, are being created at an accelerated rate on all continents, including the US. They provide farmers easier access to the significant world markets that avoid the controversial technology.

The introduction of GM crops in 1996 was heralded by agribusiness as the key to greater profits, but the opposite ensued. Europe cut off its \$300 million corn purchases. Japan soy orders dropped by nearly 25 percent. Lowered prices for GM commodities boosted U.S. subsidies by an estimated \$2-3 billion per year. Even the threat of GM wheat being introduced rallied the industry to try to make North America a GM-wheat-free-zone.

If Iowans knew before 1996 about the loss of GM markets, they could have created GM-free zones. If they knew before 1999 that A.E. Staley and ADM would not take varieties of GM corn not approved in the EU, they could have created EU-approved zones. If they realized that StarLink was not approved for human consumption, they could have created StarLink-free zones before its discovery in taco shells prompted the recall of more than 300 brands and massive economic damage to the farm sector.

It's hard to predict the future, but there are clear trends. Organic agriculture is the only sector bounding ahead at a double digit growth rate. Iowa has about 900 organic grain farmers—one of the largest contingents in the Midwest—and many others are testing the waters.

GM markets continue to dry up with the consistent finding that the more people learn about the technology, the less they trust it. Now, even GM animal feed markets are shrinking overseas due to consumer demand for GM-free meat. Many EU retailers promise this to their buyers and as of February 10, 2005, three major Australian poultry producers are also refusing GM feed. An ISU economist projected that if GM wheat were introduced here, 30-50 percent of our foreign markets would go elsewhere and wheat prices would drop by a third. This could put wheat into competition with corn as a feed grain.

And we also know that Iowa hosts field trials of GM varieties unapproved for the market. The most threatening of these is the corn engineered to create pharmaceuticals. In 2002, 155 acres in Pocahontas County had to be destroyed because of “pharm” corn contamination. If drug-producing corn got mixed up in the food supply, the debacle could eclipse StarLink.

Looking at current trends, farmers may decide to create a pharm-corn free zone, an organic corridor, an approved-variety-only sector, a non-GM marketing zone, or any one of a number of zones to capitalize on any future trend, GM-related or not. Zones can give farmers greater control, greater profits, and better protection. The Iowa bills, however, would prevent all that. If they pass, biotech companies would be the winner and Iowa farms and communities would be the loser.

To view a sampling of possible future news stories with and without these laws in place, go to <http://www.seedsofdeception.com/iowafutures.php>.

These bills are being debated during the first week in March, 2005 (at least). For Iowans wanting to contact state representatives on this issue, visit www.seedsofdeception.com/iowa. Non-Iowans please forward this to your Iowa friends.