

## Open Letter to The Western Producer

*(not published)*

*April 20, 2009*

### GM Makes Strides with Acceptance???

“Thank you to The WP for sharing my perspectives with your readers re: your Mar. 19 editorial titled, “*GM makes strides with acceptance*”.

I believe editorials are the most important piece of any newspaper. They allow the reader to understand the personal position(s) of the editor(s) and provide transparency to the reader.

As a journalist who has been covering the topic of GM for many years, the title of this particular editorial caught my attention.

I believe WP readers deserve balance and as it relates to the issue of GM, I speak of the balance that an industry publication could provide its readers by sharing the perspectives of eaters (and not only industry and/or farmers). This is the focus of my own work; bridging the gap between the farmer/eater so both sides can better understand each other.

The WP is also in a unique position as likely being the most notable medium communicating the marketing messages of biotechnology companies. While some publications might view editorial content and advertising as separate entities, I would submit that the heavy concentration of biotech advertising in The WP carries with it a strong influence on your readers’ perspectives on biotechnology. I believe the presence of these ads should be considered when developing balanced editorial content.

With that said, I believe WP readers deserve to learn *why* so many eaters reject GM.

As I’ve come to observe through my own work, rejections of GM are *not* because eaters ‘misunderstand’ the science (as is so often the conclusions made within WP articles on GM), but is the result of eaters not trusting those providing and/or funding the science itself. More importantly, many eaters also recognize that science is not the be-all and end-all of explanations.

Eaters have an important perspective on issues such as GM because they’re not restricting their views to what they see through a microscope and a financial statement. Their vision is broader, more holistic, and diverse. As any farmer would know, diversity in nature is vital to sustainability and I believe the same goes for diversity found within our perspectives.

It's these very concerns among the eating public that have driven democratically elected politicians to take the stand they do against GM. Yet, in light of a biotech industry-funded report featured in the WP's Feb. 19 issue, WP editors concluded in the Mar. 19 editorial that the report's findings (which forecasted growth in the planting of GM crops worldwide) "marks a diminishing of the political pandering to fear represented by blanket rejections of GM crops".

Firstly, I absolutely fail to see how numerical figures of GM planting worldwide suggest a diminishing of "political pandering to fear". That's quite a stretch.

Secondly, it's a pretty lofty position to suggest that political figures worldwide who have held GM back from widespread approval and acceptance are "pandering".

I wouldn't consider the over half-dozen mandatory labelling bills introduced in the House of Commons over the past 10 years as a result of "pandering". Clearly, there are Members of Parliament in this country who are representing the concerns of their constituents and the interests of Canadians. That's their job, and the last thing any Canadian should do is mock their job by calling it "pandering". I would imagine that the 101 MPs who, in May 2008 voted in support of Bill C-517 and which called for the mandatory labelling of food containing GMOs, would be insulted to hear that their vote was merely "pandering".

As an aside, only 156 MPs opposed the bill.

What I would instead suggest is that irrespective of what the 'science' concludes, WP editors and industry should come to recognize that since the introduction of GM, industry has fundamentally failed to convince the eating public that GM is safe and representative of an appropriate shift in agricultural practices.

If industry *had* indeed succeeded in communicating assurances to the public, then they would need not continually block the establishment of mandatory labelling laws. Furthermore, if GM should appear great in the eyes of the eater, then a label on a package of food would be inconsequential (and maybe even act as a selling feature) instead of the threat that it represents to the current structure of the agri-food sector.

Again, this threat is not because eaters are stupid, but because industry has failed to convince Canadians that GM food is an appropriate and safe technology to plant and consume.

As for the 156 MPs who opposed Bill C-517, it should be noted that two days before the vote, a final debate on the bill ensued. Rising first was Conservative MP Rob Merrifield who is also a farmer growing GM crops. He encouraged MPs to oppose the bill.

In his argument, he insisted that GM crops do not carry environmental concerns because "technology has allowed a Terminator gene to be put in so that the new

generation of those seeds that are grown are not allowed to be reproduced and to cause that kind of a problem.”

As I’m sure any WP reader knows, Terminator (or Genetic Use Restriction Technologies) are not yet approved anywhere in the world. Yet even an experienced farmer like Merrifield is clearly unaware of what GM technology is and what is growing on his land. Clearly, it’s not just eaters who are “misinformed”.

Canadian farmers should be asking themselves, if informed and truthful comments were indeed shared prior to the voting of this bill, would Canada now be one of many countries home to mandatory labelling laws?

Given a similar bill will likely be introduced in the near future, Canadian farmers deserve to understand these perspectives in case they need to one day explore their options if and when ‘GM crops make strides with rejection’.

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