

Show Transcript
Deconstructing Dinner
Kootenay Co-op Radio
Nelson, B.C. Canada

April 15, 2010

Title: The Vote on Bill C-474 (Protecting Farmers from Economic Harm of GE Crops)

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Jon Steinman: And welcome to Deconstructing Dinner a syndicated weekly radio show and Podcast produced in Nelson, British Columbia at Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY. I'm Jon Steinman and as promised, on today's episode we're following up on our March 25th broadcast on Bill C-474 – a bill that is calling for changes to the process through which genetically engineered seeds are approved in Canada. The bill was supported by many groups such as the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, the National Farmers Union and the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network and was *strongly opposed* by groups like CropLife Canada who represents the biotechnology and pesticide industry.

The bill, which was introduced by NDP Member of Parliament Alex Atamanenko was voted on in Canada's House of Common on April 14th and received enough support be sent to committee by a vote in *favour* of the bill, 153-134.

On today's broadcast we'll learn of the *next* steps that this bill must now go through and as usual, we'll deconstruct some *more* questionable remarks made by Conservative members in the House of Commons during the *second* hour of debate on the bill on April 1st. Adding *to* our deconstructing we'll also look closer at just *where* this perpetual *mis* and perhaps *dis*-information among Members of Parliament comes from... what Bill C-474 has helped expose are some of the sheer inaccurate perceptions of what genetically engineered seeds are and most disturbingly, this misinformation has clearly permeated farmer organizations.

Joining us to help deconstruct the second hour of debate will be Terry Boehm – the President of Canada's National Farmers Union, we'll be joined by Liberal MP Wayne Easter – the party's critic on agriculture, and we'll also listen in on his and *other* Members' statements from the April 1st debate including Conservative MP Brian Storseth and NDP MPs Don Davies and Alex Atamanenko.

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House of Commons, The Speaker: Bill C-474, an Act respecting the Seeds Regulations (analysis of potential harm), be now read a second time and referred to the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food. All those on my left in favour of the motion will please rise. (MP vote taken) All those opposed to the motion will please rise. (MP vote taken) yes: 153 no: 134. I declare the motion carried.

JS: The House of Commons, on the evening of April 14th, when Bill C-474 was voted upon by Canada's Members of Parliament.

Now it was on March 17th when the bill was *first* debated in the House, shortly after which we aired our March 25th episode that *deconstructed* that debate. Fast-forward to April 1st, the bill was debated for

another hour and then, on April 14th, as heard there, the bill was approved and sent to committee by a vote of 153-134.

C-474 was introduced by Member of Parliament Alex Atamanenko with the hope that the 2009 incident when Canadian flax farmers were shut out of their number one export market, would never happen to farmers again. It *was* in the summer of 2009 when a *once*-approved variety of genetically engineered flax was discovered in shipments to Europe. Bill C-474 was created in *response to* that incident by requesting that Canada's seed approval process for *GE* seeds require that a, "analysis of potential harm to export markets be conducted *before* the sale of any new genetically engineered seed is permitted." Supporters *of* the bill see such a move as being capable of protecting any negative impacts from *future* introductions of GE varieties such as alfalfa and wheat – which, in the case of alfalfa, some varieties *have* received environmental release approval but have *not* yet received registration, while in the case of *wheat*, no varieties have yet been approved although ongoing research into their development is underway.

Now *despite* support for the bill by Canada's *largest* farmer organization (the Canadian Federation of Agriculture), *Conservative* members of parliament (which for our International listeners represent the government of the day) have aggressively *opposed* this bill... stating that among other things, it will stifle research and development and, had it been in place 30 years ago, it would have destroyed the canola industry from ever forming. And so, it was no surprise that on April 14th, the votes were quite expected... with all Liberal, NDP and Bloc Quebecois members voting in *favour* of sending the bill to Committee... and *almost* all Conservative members opposing it... now I say "almost"... because surprisingly, there were *two* Conservative MPs from British Columbia who voted in *favour* of the bill, the MP for Kelowna-Lake Country - Ron Cannan and for Nanaimo-Alberni – James Lunney. What seems clear is that the very active efforts of groups like the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network that provided resources to Canadians encouraging them to write to their MPs to support the bill was very successful. CBAN's active campaign resulted in thousands of letters being sent to MPs and it was perhaps this among other reasons that the *tone* of Conservative statements on this bill changed *dramatically* between the first hour of debate on March 17th and the second hour on April 1st.

To capture just how *much* that tone changed... let's take a listen to a short clip we heard here on the show a few weeks ago of Conservative MP David Anderson on March 17th speaking in opposition to this bill...

David Anderson: Thank you Mr. Speaker. I'm very disturbed to be here today to see this attempt to mislead farmers and Canadians. This is not about farmers, this is about the NDP's opposition to GMOs and I think everybody needs to understand that.

JS: And then on April 1st, a different tone by Conservative MP Brian Storseth.

Brian Storseth: Thank you very much Mr. Speaker and it's an honor to be here to speak today on this very important piece of legislation, bill C-474. Mr. Speaker, that being said I would like to commend the member from BC Southern Interior. He has been an excellent member of the Standing committee on Agriculture. Although I may not agree with all his positions, he certainly comes to those positions through well thought out time and effort and I know it is generally his intent to put good public policy forward.

JS: So quite a dramatic shift in tone between the March 17th and April 1st debate and *perhaps* the result of this active campaign in *support* of the bill.

But despite Storseth's more gentle tone as he addressed this bill on April 1st, his statements were still quite clearly in opposition to it... and similar to what we heard asked on our previous show on this bill... just *where* is this opposition coming from if Canada's largest farmer organization and many Canadians are vocally in support of it, well we don't need to look too far to first arrive at the Canadian Canola Growers Association, who, despite being a *farmer* organization, issued a grossly inaccurate press release prior to the debate on April 1st and then again an almost identical one on April 15th, the day after the debate. In it they wrote, "If the criteria proposed in this bill had existed 30 years ago, Canada's canola industry, the healthy oil derived from it, and the \$14 billion in economic activity that the industry generates would likely not exist today." So we *now* know where the statement came from that we heard on the show a few weeks ago from Conservative MP David Anderson who issued those *exact* words in a letter to one of his constituents that we read on our recent episode. But the statement is, completely false. Bill C-474 is instead requesting an assessment of *genetically engineered* varieties, which, 30 years ago were still 15 years *away* from being approved for cultivation in Canada. In other words, no assessment of harm to export markets would have been necessary because the canola at the time was conventionally bred and the industry also, alive and well.

And so Deconstructing Dinner *invited* the Canadian Canola Growers Association onto the show to speak about this and their other concerns with the bill, but the Association's Communications Director, Kelly Green, turned down our invitation. But we *did* get in touch with Terry Boehm – the President of the National Farmers Union – one of the organizations *supporting* the bill. Terry has lent his voice to the show on many occasions and he spoke to us from his farm in Allan, Saskatchewan. He responds to the Canola Growers Association's assertion, that had Bill C-474 been in place 30 years ago, the Canola industry would likely not exist today.

Terry Boehm: Well nothing could be further from the truth and I can't emphasize that enough, and here's why. Canola was developed by conventional breeding techniques. The vast majority of Canola varieties ten years ago were conventionally bred open pollinated varieties. The oil profiles etc. were all developed with conventional means and that industry was progressing quite nicely based on conventional varieties.

JS: Terry added that not only would this bill have *not* prevented the canola industry from forming but even if such a bill were in place *today*, he suggests it would *not* even impact the canola sector.

Terry Boehm: The Canola industry would not be threatened at all if (Bill C-)474 existed because it's speaking towards GM and the harm to export markets, and indeed when GM varieties were introduced in Canola the decision was made shortly thereafter that we'd abandon the European market and we'd just go for it. Now, what's happened through largely private control of the Canola varieties, they've been canceling or deregistering most of the conventional varieties so the only option left to farmers is to produce the biotech varieties at this point. Nothing could be further from the truth that thirty years ago the Canola industry wouldn't have developed if the varieties would have been assessed for market harm on a GM criteria. This is patently false.

JS: The National Farmers Union's Terry Boehm. Now with such misinformation being spread by groups *like* the Canadian Canola Growers' Association who again refused our invitation to come on to the show, how has this information made it's way to *Liberal* members... and do *they*, like their Conservative colleagues, buy into this misinformation...

I followed up with Liberal MP Wayne Easter who is the party's agriculture critic and he spoke to

Deconstructing Dinner from his office in Ottawa. Wayne spoke of the efforts by industry to *encourage* Liberal MPs to oppose the bill.

Wayne Easter: Let's deal with both sides of the equation. In terms of the Canadian Canola Growers position I think they're way over the top. Their argument is over the top. I've had trade associations and farm groups come visit me as well, saying that research monies will dry up as a result of this even being moved to committee for debate. Come on, that's just threats. I heard that same kind of argument when we took on the Liberal government in 1995 – 96 to prevent RGBH, which is the hormone injected into dairy cattle to produce more milk, we prevented that product from coming into Canada because it made no sense under our marketing system, wouldn't have enhanced the profits of producers in any event, and the risk assessments, we felt, were just not there. But the threat at that time from Monsanto and others was that research monies would dry up. Well, they didn't. So I think it's over the top on that side. In terms of Terry Boehm's remarks, I think on the GMO issue, or genetic engineering, he has been over the top at times as well in terms of the fear factor. But I do agree with him in terms of the natural breeding. You go back a time, natural breeding was what it was and it wasn't genetically modified.

JS: Liberal MP Wayne Easter. Now the spread of misinformation prior to the debates in the House of Commons on this bill does *not* stop at the Canadian Canola Growers' Association, and also filtered down to their provincial group, the *Manitoba* Canola Growers Association. Similar to the efforts launched by groups like the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network who support the bill, the Manitoba Canola Growers *also* offered a template for *their* members to write to Members of Parliament requesting they *oppose* the bill. Now preparing such a letter seems quite fair *had* that letter *not* contained some glaring misinformation. The letter starts by stating that, "The legislation is a significant threat to Canadian agriculture," and in its defense it reads, "Canadian growers value access to genetically modified crops for the real benefits they bring to agricultural production. These benefits include... Access to crop varieties that provide *consumer benefits* such as *healthy oils, trans fat replacements* and overall *nutrition benefits*."

Now again, as we've highlighted on so many occasions here on Deconstructing Dinner, while there is an *intent* to try and produce such GE crops with "consumer benefits" there are at this time *no* genetically engineered varieties that have been commercialized in Canada that offer these said "consumer benefits". Instead, the benefits listed in the letter such as "healthy oils", "trans-fat replacements" and "nutrition benefits", can *only* be associated at this point with conventional breeding and *not* genetic engineering, thereby making the statement completely irrelevant to the bill at hand and completely false.

Here again is Terry Boehm responding to the Manitoba Canola Growers understanding of the said-benefits of genetically engineered crops.

Terry Boehm: Unfortunately in the Canadian system all of these characteristics that have been developed by conventional breeding techniques have had the trans-gene added, the herbicide tolerant gene, and then they become biotech varieties by that, but it has nothing to do with any of these characteristics that they're speaking to. So unfortunately farmers and parliamentarians and the general public sometimes associate the advances in agronomic and yield, in oil profiles and whatnot as being products of biotechnology, and they're not. These things have been brought about by conventional breeding and the biotech gene, the herbicide tolerant gene has been added. All of the advantages they're speaking of have actually almost universally resulted, and I'm only being slightly cautious, but I'm sure that it's actually universally have resulted from conventional breeding techniques.

JS: The Manitoba Canola Growers also insisted in their template letter to MPs that benefits of GMOs have also included “disease-resistance” and “drought-tolerance” and yet again, there are *no* commercialized varieties in Canada of GE crops with such said benefits, and *again* are two benefits that can already be found from conventional breeding.

And so as far as Members of Parliament who would have *received* this template prepared by the Manitoba Canola Growers, not all MPs like Wayne Easter seem to have seen through such statements. Instead, many Conservative MPs seem to have been quite easily drawn *into* these same myths that have only prevented *them* and other industry and farmer groups from understanding what a genetically engineered crop even is.

Again, speaking on April 1st was Conservative MP Brian Storseth. Storseth represents the Alberta riding of Westlock-St.Paul and he cautioned members that a vote in favour of this bill would stifle the research and development of Canada’s very own Ministry of Agriculture and Agri-Food.

Brian Storseth: For generations our farmers have practiced selective breeding to improve the qualities and characteristics of their crops. In labs across the country our researchers are working hard to develop new plant varieties and technologies that will continue to support a vibrant agriculture sector. New plant varieties offer a number of clear benefits including more effective pest control, higher yields and reduced impact on the environment. Canada is proud to share our new technology with the world. Canada's success with agriculture has long depended upon the sectors ability to adapt to a changing marketplace by using new technologies to help lower production costs, and to enhance the range of products available to meet new consumer demands.

I'd like to spend a few moments highlighting one example of how Canadian innovation is helping farmers around the world, including farmers in poorer countries. The government of Canada has invested thirteen million dollars to combat wheat stem rust, known as UG99. A fungus, which poses a threat to wheat production. Canada is a leader in this kind of research. Our scientists are doing important work to develop new varieties of wheat resistant to this fungus. Adding in trade and other issues unrelated to science could set a very dangerous precedent. We want to be sure that we don't risk bogging things down in red tape. We want to be sure that we continue to bring new technologies, like our research into wheat stem rust, to the world.

JS: Conservative MP Brian Storseth. As heard there Storseth used the Canadian government’s research on wheat stem rust as an example of just *why* Bill C-474 should be opposed, but there’s only one problem with his use of this example. Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada’s research on wheat stem rust has *nothing* to do with genetic engineering and therefore is completely irrelevant to the intention of the bill which again, is specifically targeting genetically engineered varieties. To be sure, Deconstructing Dinner contacted researchers *with* the department and received a response from Peter Hicklenton, a Science Director of Crop Production Systems for Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. Peter is the director of the department’s research on developing wheat varieties *resistant* to the wheat stem rust, and he confirmed that their research indeed *only* involves conventional breeding.

Deconstructing Dinner shared our findings on this with Liberal MP Wayne Easter.

Wayne Easter: I think one of the problems with Brian's argument in this case is that the government members are so opposed to this bill that they're exaggerating the debate, using any issue they can to exaggerate the debate. And I come back to my original point. Let's try and not exaggerate it on either

side. Let's bring in the witnesses, hear what they have to say. Is this bill the right place to in fact deal with this issue? If it's not is there another approach we should be taking? But let's have the debate based by having witnesses who can come in with substantive facts.

JS: This is Deconstructing Dinner. On today's episode we're following-up on the April 14th vote in Canada's House of Commons that supported Bill C-474 from being sent to committee for further discussion. The bill is calling for changes to Canada's *approvals* of genetically engineered seeds so that any economic harm that *might* be inflicted on farmers from the introduction of such varieties be avoided. Currently, there are *no* mechanisms in place as part of the approval process to assess that economic harm. If you miss any of today's show it is archived online at deconstructingdinner.ca and posted under the April 15th, 2010 broadcast. You can also from there link to our March 25th episode that first explored this unique bill.

Now since that first episode on C-474 aired here on the show, some more curious statements have been issued by opponents of the bill. As we heard on that episode, there was mention by *more* than one Conservative MP that the threat of economic harm to farmers by introducing genetically engineered seeds is best left up to *industry* to manage and *not* government. Promoting this position *since* that March 25th episode has been the Canadian Canola Growers Association and CropLife Canada (who for new listeners to the show is the trade association representing companies like Monsanto, Dow, Bayer and other major seed and pesticide producers). CropLife has been active in trying to discourage MPs from voting for this bill to be sent to committee, and on their website they refer visitors to the Canola Council of Canada's Market Access Policy - a policy that was also referenced by the Canola Growers Association in their March 23rd press release, and it was also mentioned in an *opinion* piece about the Bill authored *by* the Canola Growers Association's Rick White and published in the Western Producer - Canada's largest agricultural weekly. In *all* cases, the groups promote the policy's *supposed* success as a key reason as to *why* Bill C-474 is *not* necessary. According to the Canola Council that policy is a, "voluntary agreement that ensures that new genetically modified seed traits are *only* introduced to Canadian producers when they have been approved in *all* major export markets."

Now when *we* first read this, we were left quite perplexed because just as we shared on our previous episode on the show, when GE canola was introduced in 1995, there were a number of major markets like Japan, who had *not* yet approved the importation of GE canola and nor had Europe. Even China didn't approve the import of GE crops until 2004.

And perhaps most importantly almost all of Canada's canola is now genetically engineered, with organic growers not even considering growing the crop because of fears of contamination.

Deconstructing Dinner introduced this seemingly *unsuccessful* policy to Terry Boehm of the National Farmers Union and we asked if *he* believes this market access policy is a valid substitute for Bill C-474.

Terry Boehm: No it's not. It's taken a lot of negotiation, in many cases after the fact, by Canadian negotiators to get other markets to accept what we've approved. In Japan it's an ongoing thing for Canadian negotiators to continue to have them accept GM canola varieties. Europe is another example. And I guess what I would say as a blanket statement is that there are no markets that are closed to conventionally bred varieties in the world that I know of. But there certainly are markets that are closed to GM varieties. I think that this concept of responsible introduction of GM traits, in Canada, in canola, there simply isn't any other game. So any trait that comes along they have to pay attention to other regulatory regimes, but what else is being presented?

JS: And so again here is what Canadian farmers are being told when opinion pieces promoting these questionable assurances appear in the country's *largest* agricultural periodical among other places.

But it's indeed no surprise to find such questionable remarks in the Western Producer, and even the publication's editors themselves have in the past revealed very similar perspectives. Most recently was their April 8th, 2010 editorial, which focused exclusively on Bill C-474 and was titled, "Market Acceptance Bill Could Stifle Development."

In their editorial they agree that, "organic farmers would almost *always* suffer market damage when new GE crops are introduced." Now this would seem like a statement in *support* of the bill, but instead it's the complete opposite, because as the editors continue this, "the damage suffered by a few, would deny the *majority* of farmers the potential benefits of new GM crops."

And so while it *seems* as though the editors of the Western Producer don't support the presence of organic production, instead, it *appears* that what they *don't* support is the organic standard itself, that is that *no* presence of GE is permitted in organic production. The editors believe that instead of Bill C-474, organic and non-GE farmers should, "abandon unworkable zero tolerance requirements and *allow* minute GE presence." So again, this is what Canada's largest agricultural publication is communicating to Canadian farmers.

But let's come back to this assertion, that the industry and *not* government can take care of ensuring export markets are *not* harmed by the introduction of new GE varieties. Now for the Western Producer to promote such an idea, which they do, is an odd position to say the least in light of the publication's extensive coverage on the GE flax contamination of 2009. The incident was a *clear* example that the industry is *not* capable of managing the release of undesired GE varieties and as the National Farmers Union's Terry Boehm also adds, had that variety been registered to a private interests and not a public breeder, the efforts to get that variety deregistered would have been much more difficult.

In the editorial the editors promote their industry-driven regulating concept by forecasting how any future introduction of GE wheat might unfold. In their reasoning and *without* providing any evidence, the editors suggest that wheat farmers have suffered because canola, corn and soybean growers' yields have been enhanced by the addition of GM traits.

As Deconstructing Dinner shared on our May 14th, 2009 episode, there is *no* compelling evidence to suggest that *any* yield increases anywhere in the world have been the result of genetic engineering. Deconstructing Dinner asked the National Farmers Union's Terry Boehm *to* respond to the Western Producer's April 8th editorial.

Terry Boehm: Again, the Western Producer editorial perpetuates the myth that somehow biotechnology is the vehicle to obtain beneficial results in yield or stress responses in plants, etc. And that somehow biotechnology is going to make, for example wheat, a competitive, profitable crop for farmers. I would seriously like to challenge that idea. First of all even Hugh Grant, in Forbes Magazine in July, the chief executive officer of Monsanto, made the statement that these improvements are brought about by conventional breeding and that the addition of biotech genes helps to assure the potential advantages of these crops that have come about by conventional breeding techniques.

The other piece of it is though, and I think it's an important one, is that with bringing forward for example biotech wheat and assuming that you can get the world to accept it, as the Western Producer

editorial speaks to it. First of all, what does biotech bring? In Western Canada it's simplified, for example canola production, but it's made it one of the most expensive, through seed costs and intellectual property fees incorporated into the seed costs, one of the most expensive mainstream crops to produce on the prairies. The price of seed has gone up nine times from what it was a decade ago. Now farmers are paying four hundred and fifty dollars a bushel for that canola seed. The same results will occur if you go down the GM wheat path and eliminate the public wheat varieties over time, the conventional varieties. And you jeopardize markets at the same time. Make no mistake about it: canola is one thing, and oil is another. People around the world are not enthusiastic about eating GM in their daily bread and in their pastas, and markets are not likely to open up there. Because canola is sold as an oil and commands a bit more of a premium in the marketplace than wheat does, just because biotech wheat comes along, it's got nothing to do with making that more competitive or profitable for farmers other than likely creating the same scenario as canola – controls around seed use, you know, the elimination of that possibility for farmers, and ratcheting up the price and making them dependant on a particular production system that involves a couple of herbicides.

JS: And so with all of this misinformation coming from groups like the Canadian Canola Growers Association, the Manitoba Canola Growers Association, CropLife Canada and the Western Producer, it raises the question as to whether or not this information is just a *misunderstanding*, or if it's intentionally *misleading*. Terry Boehm believes it to be a bit of both.

Terry Boehm: I think it's a combination of the two. I think there is a lot of misunderstanding out there. But I think also there's tremendous pressure from biotechnology companies, etc., sort of raising the specter of threat that they won't invest in developing new varieties if anything gets in their way. This clearly has existed since the famous Schmeiser case. The Canola Growers Association sided with Monsanto in the Supreme Court case in their intervention and what was presented to them was again this boogeyman that the canola industry, investment in canola varieties is going to disappear unless these companies have all this protection. It's really a double standard. The companies need to have all the mechanisms and absolutely nothing that will get in the way of them making money. But then when farmers, through (Bill C) 474 are trying to protect their economic interests, we as a country and as farmers cannot continue to lose whole crop sectors to GM contamination or to GM developments. It doesn't make sense. But this double standard seems to apply – oh, (Bill C) 474, a sensible economic analysis of what the market harm is, is going to be a disaster, and as farmers and as a country we have to accept economic disasters because biotechnology is somehow the silver bullet, the innovation that's going to save us all. But that's not the reality at all. Unfortunately that myth is perpetuated in the growers associations and beyond and it really needs to be looked at coldly and clearly.

JS: The National Farmers' Union's President, Terry Boehm

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JS: This is Deconstructing Dinner produced at Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY in Nelson, British Columbia. I'm Jon Steinman. Today we're following up on our March 25th feature on Bill C-474, which, at that point had only received one-hour of debate in Canada's House of Commons. *Since* then, the bill was debated for yet another hour on April 1st and voted on on April 14th. Introduced by NDP Member of Parliament Alex Atamanenko, the bill is calling for an amendment to Canada's *Seeds Regulations* to, "require that an analysis of potential harm to export markets be conducted before the sale of any new genetically engineered seed is permitted." Proponents of genetic engineering have aggressively encouraged MPs to *not* vote for this bill, but their efforts were seemingly *not* enough to outweigh the aggressive campaign by other groups who were *encouraging* MPs to vote for the bill.

It was on April 14th, when members of parliament voted 153-134 to send the bill to Canada's Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food where it will now be discussed in greater detail. Liberal, NDP and Bloc Quebecois members all voted in favour of the bill, and two Conservative MPs also voted in favour of the bill leaving the 134 members who *opposed* it, being Conservative members.

And so between this episode and our March 25th show, we've spent considerable time examining much of the misinformation that so often permeates these types of discussions on genetically engineered food. Some *of* that information that we deconstructed was in reference to the catalyst for the bill... the 2009 contamination of Canada's flax supply. Canada's flax industry is worth \$325 million dollars, and with up to 70% of exports heading to Europe, it hit farmers hard when in mid-2009, it was discovered that flax shipments were contaminated with a genetically engineered variety. The contamination came as a shock because the flax in question was *not* registered for commercial use however, at one point it *was*. In 1996 a GM variety known as Triffid was developed at the University of Saskatchewan and received variety registration by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. From that point forward the variety was legally permitted to be produced for seed and by 2001, 200,000 bushels were cultivated. But when the Flax Council of Canada recognized the danger that this posed to their export markets, they successfully encouraged the CFIA to *deregister* the variety. With that clearly being too late of an action, Bill C-474 was created to prevent a similar incident from occurring again.

And so it came as a surprise, when on March 17th, Liberal Member of Parliament Francis Valeriote stated in Canada's House of Commons that this bill, had it been in place prior to the flax incident, it would *not* have prevented the contamination. His reason was that the flax was, "never approved for sale in Canada." Now what became clear *from* our March 25th episode on the issue is that the wording of the bill has evoked a wide range of interpretations because as Deconstructing Dinner and many others have confirmed, that flax was very much approved in 1996 through environmental release approval and then in that same year through variety registration, but confusion seems to have arisen because the flax in question was never *sold* into the commercial market, but regardless it was very much approved, and even Conservative MP Brian Storseth agrees that the intention of this bill is to address variety registration which he mentioned on April 1st in the House of Commons.

And so with Conservative, NDP, Bloc Quebecois and even opposition trade groups all recognizing that this bill would impact Canada's approval of GE varieties, it left us again perplexed when, on April 1st, Liberal MP Wayne Easter echoed Valeriote's statement that Bill C-474 would *not* have prevented the flax contamination from occurring

Wayne Easter: I will admit, Mr. Speaker, that I have mixed opinions on this bill, but will say off the top of this debate that I am willing to allow it to go to Committee.

This bill would not have necessarily prevented the Triffid issue from happening. In 2001, Canadian flax producers, through the Canadian Flax Council, moved to have the CFIA, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, remove the variety registration for GM flax in order to protect their export markets. The E.U. accounts for approximately 70% of Canada's flax exports. I make that point Mr. Speaker, because the flax industry did everything it could do to prevent genetically modified flax from affecting that European market, yet it still did however Triffid got into the marketplace, and this bill wouldn't have prevented that from happening.

JS: Now the National Farmers Union's Terry Boehm disagrees with Easter's assessment of the bill and he shared his thoughts with us from his farm in Allan, Saskatchewan.

Terry Boehm: Frankly it's inaccurate because first of all, the bill, in assessing potential market harm for a particular variety, GM or otherwise, if that assessment took place and was a criteria for allowing the registration of a variety or not, then definitely that bill would have prevented what happened with Triffid flax. The reality is that Triffid flax was registered, and it was multiplied and it was only by extraordinary actions that we pressured to have the variety de-registered and tried to have all of the considerable amounts of multiplied seed destroyed. But if (Bill) 474 would have been in place and would have prevented the original variety registration of that variety then we wouldn't have had this problem.

JS: Now I did share Terry Boehm's disagreement with Easter's April 1st comments *with* Wayne Easter himself. And despite Easter having the same timeline of approvals that we have here at Deconstructing Dinner, he continues to maintain that the bill would not have necessarily prevented the 2009 flax contamination. And it's these differing interpretations of the bill that led him to vote in favour of it so that more discussion could take place.

Wayne Easter: I think one of the reasons why we as the Liberal Party decided to send it to Committee is to in fact get witnesses on both side of the equation to come forward with their evidence from their point of view. This is a controversial issue and I do believe we should have the debate at Committee, as you can tell from my remarks at the House of Commons. I do have some serious concerns about this particular bill, but on the other hand, I do not think we should limit debate. Lets hear what those concerns are on both sides of the argument and then make a decision.

Wayne Easter: Let me turn to the issues that I believe need to be discussed at Committee. I believe in a science-based system. And this bill, I really don't know how the mover of the bill really intends to measure market harm, but I'm certainly willing to go to Committee and see how the mover of the bill intends to do that, and have a discussion with witnesses on both sides of this issue, on the table in a transparent way, to deal with this proposal in a very constructive way.

JS: Wayne Easter speaking on Bill C-474 on April 1st in Canada's House of Commons. Now what is clear from Easter's comments, is that despite Liberal members voting in *favour* of sending the bill to Committee, some Liberal members maintain *many* reservations, reservations that led *Conservative* member Brian Storseth to make some strong follow-up statements about the Liberal support for the bill.

Brian Storseth: It really is difficult to pin down the Liberal Party and some of these members on exactly what their positions are, and I can't help but to be a little saddened by the position that they're taking on this. It is a fundamentally, I think, dishonest position when they say 'we want to sit and talk about this. We want to pass it through to committee' knowing all along that he's going to vote against this bill and try and kill this bill in Committee.

JS: Without an opportunity for Easter to respond to Storseth's statement, Deconstructing Dinner invited Easter to respond to his allegation.

Wayne Easter: Well, what I've said all along is lets put it to Committee, hear the facts and we will make a judgment call. Our intent is not necessarily to kill it at Committee. My position right now is that I don't believe that this is the right bill to be going forward with. Yes there's a concern over genetically engineered seeds, and I think as I said in my remarks, I've got many concerns on that. We're moving from a system that has been science-based to one that's more based on emotion. That we're trying to use the Seeds Act to do something that's much broader than the Seeds Act. But even though I'm

opposed in those areas, by putting it to Committee I think we will learn on both sides of the issue whether this is the right thing to do under the Seeds Act, and if that was the case then we could move forward. If it's not the right place for it to be, we'll have the benefit of the discussion, and look at, is there other areas where you can deal with this, which is a concern among many Canadians. Is there another place to place it?

So, I've laid it right out there. I've not said we're going to vote against it when we get it to Committee, but I've said we have got some very substantive concerns.

JS: Liberal MP Wayne Easter.

Now worthy of some deconstructing are Easter's fears that Bill C-474 would move Canada's regulatory system from a science-based system to one based on "emotion". Easter also expressed this fear in the House of Commons and so did his colleague Francis Valeriote. And *Conservative* members have too expressed similar concerns such as Brian Storseth's comments from April 1st, heard here.

Brian Storseth: We need to be very cautious of any move to introduce a subjective, non-scientific element to our oversight in the introduction of new technologies. I'm referring to socio-economic considerations, like consumers' attitudes in other countries to genetically engineered food. These matters are not science based and can change overnight.

JS: Now these fears are indeed ones that will come up as this bill goes to Committee in the near future, but to dismiss this bill based on its "socio-economic" considerations, is to ignore Canada's commitment made on April 19th, 2001 to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety - an international treaty governing the movement of living modified organisms (LMOs) resulting from modern biotechnology from one country to another. Now this was a protocol *first* introduced in Montreal on January 29th, 2000 at the *Convention* on Biological Diversity. The protocol was later opened for signature by the United Nations and entered into force on September 11th, 2003.

To date, 157 countries have implemented instruments to ratify their commitment, however *Canada*, who signed the protocol, has not made an effort to ratify *its* commitment (as an aside, the United States did *not* sign the agreement).

But of interest to Bill C-474 is Article 26 of the protocol titled, "Socio-Economic Considerations" again a consideration that appears to be feared by both Conservative and Liberal members yet according *to* this article, signatory parties may, "take into account socio-economic considerations arising from the impact of living modified organisms on the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity, especially with regard to the value of biological diversity to indigenous and local communities." The article continues by stating that parties are also "encouraged to cooperate on research and information exchange on any *socio-economic* impacts of living modified organisms, especially on indigenous and local communities."

Now *our* take on this here at Deconstructing Dinner is that voting *for* Bill C-474 to go to Committee and at the *very* least be discussed, is very much respecting Canada's 2001 commitment to the Cartagena Protocol, leaving the 134 Conservative members who opposed the bill having completely ignored the recommendations that Canada agreed to when we signed the protocol in 2001.

soundbite

Also speaking to the fear that Canada's regulatory system for GE seed approvals will move from a science-based system to one based on, "subjective economic considerations" was the National Farmers Union's Terry Boehm. Terry views Canada's current science-centric approval process as *already* being highly subjective and if anything, he believes an economic harm assessment is a more simple equation.

Terry Boehm: One of the things that also keeps coming up is this talk that (Bill) 474 would change our regulatory system from a science-based system of approval to some other criteria. Well, our regulatory system is really just a calculation of probability that x, y or z might not do harm or is similar to the other conventional varieties or substantially equivalent. This is just an economic, mathematical calculation as to what harm would happen to the markets. So, I don't see what the problem is. It makes perfect sense.

JS: National Farmers Union President Terry Boehm speaking to Deconstructing Dinner from Allan, Saskatchewan. Again, if you've missed any of today's episode, it is archived on-line at deconstructingdinner.ca and posted under the April 15th, 2010 broadcast. From there you can check out a wealth of resources on today's topic including a link to our March 25th episode also on Bill C-474.

And as we enter into the last quarter of today's episode here on Deconstructing Dinner we'll listen to two more Members of Parliament who spoke on Bill C-474 on April 1st in Canada's House of Commons. Again, if you're just tuning in, Bill C-474 is calling for a change to Canada's Seeds Regulations to require that an analysis of potential harm to export markets be conducted prior to the sale of any genetically engineered seed is permitted. Proponents of genetic engineering have strongly *opposed* this bill, sparking NDP Member of Parliament for Vancouver-Kingsway Don Davies to recommend that those proponents stop living in, "denial."

Don Davies: GE alfalfa has already been approved for release in Canada. Monsanto has relaunched research into GE wheat. This bill seeks to prevent an economic disaster for Canadian farmers in these and other crops as well. The agronomic and environmental impact of GE seeds and GE crops is controversial. There is no scientific consensus at present and further research is most certainly needed. The economic impact of GE seeds, however, is not in question. And this is what Bill C-474 seeks to address. Other countries have taken clear positions about their domestic consumption of GE products. Many of these countries are major consumers of Canadian agricultural products. Canadian agriculture policy cannot of course exist in a vacuum. We cannot live in denial of the international market reality toward GE crops because Canadian farmers rely on these export markets for their livelihoods. The government has a duty, we submit on this side of the house, to protect the livelihood of these farmers. And the government has a duty, we New Democrats say, to consider the impact of these livelihoods before approving the sale of GE seeds.

Mr. Speaker, it is my understanding that the government spent 1.9 million dollars to deal with the contamination of the GE flax seed. Passing this bill will help farmers and save taxpayers money from having to pay for the cleanup of any future contamination.

Mr. Speaker, this bill has the support of numerous farming organizations and environmental groups. It has the support of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, which represents over two hundred thousand farmers and farm families. It's endorsed by the National Farmers Union and the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network.

Mr. Speaker, in conclusion I am pleased to support this bill and I urge my colleagues to vote to send it to Committee for further study, and I thank the Honorable Member for his work in this regard.

JS: NDP Member of Parliament for Vancouver-Kingsway, Don Davies. Davies refers to his NDP colleague Alex Atamanenko who introduced Bill C-474. Alex is the MP for BC Southern Interior – the home of Deconstructing Dinner and as is customary for Private Members Bills, the mover of the bill is granted 5-minutes at the end of the 2-hours of debate in Canada's House of Commons to share closing remarks. Here's Alex Atamanenko.

Alex Atamanenko: Thank you very much Mr. Speaker. I would first of all like to thank all my colleagues who took part in the debate over Bill C-474. It is my hope they will work hard to convince members of their respective parties to move this bill forward to Committee. It is vital that we have a thorough and democratic debate on the economic effect to farmers on any further introduction of GE organisms into the environment. Finally, at the end of the day it is up to parliamentarians, to us, to do all we can to help our farmers.

Mr. Speaker, before I move on I would just like to clear up some misconceptions. There was a number of times it was mentioned that this bill, had it been in place would not have helped the flax farmers. Well that's not entirely true because in 1996 Triffid received Feed and Environmental Release approval. In 1998 it received Food Safety authorization. Had the bill been in place at this point in time the economic impact study would have shown that it would have been unwise to continue releasing flax into the environment. It wasn't until 2001 that, because of the pressure by farmers, that flax that had already been released into the environment had been taken out and canceled. So I'd like to clear up that misconception.

The other point that's often mentioned is that, well this is somehow against science-based technology. Let's be clear. The yield increases in crops are due to traditional breeding. Traditional breeding. For example, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists there are methods right now that they're looking at that are capable of even increasing crop yields more. For example using high tech genomic approach or Marker Assisted Selection. These are non-GE methods and they're the ones that actually increase the yield.

But Mr. Speaker, I don't have a great deal of time so let me concentrate my remarks on the alfalfa industry. Mr. Paul Gregory of Interlake Forage Seeds in Manitoba states that most family owned seed companies are against the further advancement of GM traits, especially in the forage seed business. Mr. Kurt Shmon, president of Imperial Seed Limited, also in Manitoba, writes I quote, "the users, producers and retailers of alfalfa seed and hay are opposed to the introduction of RoundUp Ready alfalfa. And yet we are at a risk of the release of this product." He cites also the case of a US seed company, Cal/West, which lost its market due to GE contaminated seed. And Mr. Speaker, the key word here is contamination. According to the Saskatchewan Organic Directorate, it will be impossible to prevent the spread of GE alfalfa beyond the fields it has been planted in for the following reasons. Alfalfa is pollinated primarily by Leaf Cutter bees, which often drift several miles in search of better bloom, and also by Honey bees which have a range of up to four miles. Actually, a US study has shown that they've found a contamination radius of up to 1.7 miles already. GE alfalfa for hay is often cut after the blooming starts, therefore the pollen is easily transferred to non GM crops, and also alfalfa. Seed crops produce a percentage of what they call hard seed that can germinate several years after the field has been plowed up. Once contamination is discovered, countries that currently reject GMO crops, food and feed will obviously then reject our alfalfa. Also, a large portion of our Alfalfa Pellet and Cube Market would be lost. Our organic livestock industry would also be hit hard if GE alfalfa contamination were to be found.

Mr. Speaker, let's take the example of Argentina. Before approving GMO for market the government must have the following technical information in its hands, including the technical nature of the marketing of the GMO in the absence of potential undesirable effects on Argentinian exports.

We need a mandate to consider what the impact of doing so will have on our export markets. Bill C-474 will provide the mechanism to give them this mandate.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues to send Bill C-474 to Committee so that we can have an in-depth and democratic debate.

Let's not throw more obstacles in front of them by carelessly allowing the release of GE crops that can lead to economic harm. Thank you Mr. Speaker.

JS: NDP Member of Parliament for BC Southern Interior Alex Atamanenko. Alex is the NDP's critic on Agriculture and Agri-Food and Food Security.

As heard earlier Alex's Bill C-474 was voted upon on April 14th in the House of Commons and was approved to be sent to Committee by a vote of 153-134. Liberal, NDP and Bloc Quebecois members all voted in favour of the bill being sent to Committee and only two Conservative Members from BC voted in favour of the bill leaving 134 Conservative Members opposing it. According to MP Wayne Easter, the bill will likely not be discussed in Committee until the fall but there is a chance it might be addressed just prior to the summer.

Again, you can stay tuned to Deconstructing Dinner or our Facebook page for updates on this bill and more info on today's topic is found on deconstructingdinner.ca.

And to close out the show today, here again is an abbreviated version of the April 14th vote followed by an appropriate outro courtesy of Louisiana's Dark Fire Cloud.

House of Commons, The Speaker: Bill C-474, an Act respecting the Seeds Regulations (analysis of potential harm), be now read a second time and referred to the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food. All those on my left in favour of the motion will please rise. (MP vote taken) All those opposed to the motion will please rise. (MP vote taken) yes: 153 no: 134. I declare the motion carried.

outro: Dark Fire Cloud, Dig U Later

ending theme

JS: And that was this week's edition of Deconstructing Dinner, produced and recorded at Nelson British Columbia's Kootenay Co-op Radio. I've been your host Jon Steinman.

I thank my technical assistant John Ryan, the theme music for Deconstructing Dinner is courtesy of Nelson-area resident Adham Shaikh.

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