

Agriculture Forum held at UPEI

By Sandra Edmiston • Reporter

This past Wednesday evening, eight different opinions on genetically modified organisms and what they mean for PEI were heard in Duffy as part of the Fourth Annual Public Forum on the State of the Prince Edward Island Environment, hosted by the UPEI Environmental Studies program.

But what exactly are genetically modified organisms, or GMOs as they are commonly called?

In the simplest terms that this English major can muster, GMOs are grown from seeds that possess genetic material from other plants and organisms. GMOs used for agricultural purposes are modified to be insect or weed resistant, although genetic modification is also used for the development of pharmaceuticals and for adding nutrients to various grains, fruits, and vegetables. The genetic engineering is made possible by using recombinant DNA and other transgenic techniques. For additional general information on GMOs check out

But what do GMOs mean for PEI? This question is exactly what Wednesday's forum explored.

The first six speakers represented various organizations with similarly varied opinions on GMOs. Each presenter was asked to talk for ten minutes and in that time was expected to examine the environmental risks/benefits of GMOs, the social, cultural and economic factors involved, possible health concerns, and what PEI should do about this pressing issue.

Hon. Pat Binns, Premier of PEI, spoke first. Binns talked about agricultural issues on PEI, the growth of the organic market, and various studies done in other parts of the world on the effects of

GMOs. Binns offered no specific opinion on GMO's, but did note that PEI is different from most other areas because it is an island.

Binns ended his ten minutes with this thought: "Can the two industries [organic and GMO] exist side by side? I honestly don't know."

The second presenter, Allan Ling, spoke from a pro-GMO standpoint. Ling, owner of Lingdale Farms and President of the Atlantic Grains Council, cited economics as his reason for favoring GMOs. He also stated his belief in modern science and technology, claiming the benefits from biotechnology are only just beginning.

Perry Schmeiser, a grain and oilseed farmer from Saskatchewan, spoke strongly against GMOs. Schmeiser has been the center of the highly controversial court case with the company Monsanto. Schmeiser, a conventional farmer, was sued by Monsanto for growing genetically modified canola, the patent to which is held by Monsanto. Schmeiser claimed that he had not stolen the GMO canola seeds, but that the seeds were mixed in with his own due to wind carriage and birds. The first trial settled in favor of Monsanto, but is now being reviewed by the Supreme Court.

According to Schmeiser, companies like Monsanto pose a double threat: Monsanto's seeds contaminate the non-GMO seeds, and then Monsanto sues the farmers for that same contamination. Schmeiser raised the questions in his presentation of who has the right to patent higher life forms, what are the dangers of eating GMO foods, what are the environmental risks of GMOs (claiming that GMOs help create superweeds that require additional pesticides to control), and

who is going to protect the conventional farmer.

John Argisle of BioAtlantech followed Schmeiser with a pro-GMO presentation. Argisle, like Ling, cited economic factors as his reason for supporting GMOs and claimed that no significant research against GMOs exists. Argisle held the opinion that most anti-GMO stances are the result of misinformation and mass fear.

Dr. Bert Christie, professional agrologist, was the last of the first five speakers. Christie claimed that GMO technology has great potential, but that the present GMO foods on the market hold no benefits for the consumer. Dr. Christie spoke about the health, food safety, and environmental risks of GMOs, focusing on the creation of superweeds due to GMO resistance to regular weeds. Christie also stated that he felt much more extensive research needed to be done by independent organizations and not by private companies who had economic interests in the success of GMOs.

Three farmers from PEI also had a chance to speak. Raymond Loo, president of the PEI Certified Organic Producers Co-op, claimed that the organic and GMO industries could not exist side by side because organic seeds would be contaminated by GMO seeds.

Loo also stressed the need to act quickly in order to prevent any further contamination, stating, "It is time for us to take our destiny into our own hands to do something truly wonderful for our Island."

Danny Hendricken, District President of the PEI National Farmers Union, shared a similar opinion, comparing what he called blind faith in technology to the cru-

sades of the Middle Ages. He said that pro-GMO groups have the idea that anyone opposed to GMOs needed to be converted or removed. Hendricken also stressed the necessity of holding the provincial and federal governments accountable for what he already felt were the bad effects of GMOs.

Robert MacDonald, President of the PEI Federation of Agriculture spoke last, professing a pro-GMO stance, claiming that there was much misinformation against GMO's and that PEI would be at a huge disadvantage if it chose to be a GMO-free province.

The evening ended with various questions to the presenters from the audience regarding GMOs.

These seem to be the key questions asked about GMOs: Are they harmful? If so, in what ways? Are the economic benefits worth the possible risks? Does PEI have to conform to be like the rest of the agricultural world, or can it survive through the novelty of being the only GMO-free province? Does a corporation have the right to patent life? Can organic and GMO industries exist side by side?

No matter what the outcomes, Pamela Courtenay-Hall, professor of Philosophy and teacher in the UPEI Environmental Studies programs puts it best when she says, "On the topic of GMOs in agriculture, we have at least as much to learn from farmers as from scientists and ethicists."

Discussions such as UPEI's Forum on Wednesday help make such sharing of knowledge possible, helping PEI to reach a decision that is best for PEI and its people.