

Testimony by Tom McCoy in support of SB 633

Before the Senate Rural Communities and Economic Development Committee, March 12, 2013

My name is Tom McCoy. I grow wheat and barley in Sherman County and am also a Sherman County Commissioner. I urge you to support SB 633. Existing federal and state laws are doing a good job of regulating the safety and marketing of agricultural crops. Allowing local ordinances that ban the production of GMO crops would cause confusion and additional expense for both farmers and county governments.

As a Sherman County Commissioner, I know my county has neither the resources nor the expertise to enforce such a ban. GMO wheat looks identical to current non-GMO varieties. Samples from many fields would need to be collected. Proving a field contains GMO wheat would require the county to set up a genetic testing laboratory or to pay outside experts to do the testing. Either way would be expensive. Monitoring the sales of seed suppliers might also help identify possible GMO fields. However, obtaining the records of seed suppliers—often located in other counties or states—would also be expensive and time-consuming.

No GMO wheat is now grown in the U.S. However, I believe GMO wheat varieties will be released fairly soon. They have many advantages including reduced pesticide use, less need for tillage, reduced erosion, and, very likely, improved nutrition. However, when I was chairman of the Oregon Wheat Commission last year, our discussion focused not on the advantages of GMO wheat varieties, but on how their release can be managed so we don't lose our export markets.

Almost all of Oregon's wheat is exported and many of our best customers—including Japan—have announced they will not buy GMO wheat. To maintain exports, we must be able to continue selling them non-GMO cargos.

Under current rules, once GMO wheat is released, we won't be able to sell non-GMO cargos. Our problem is that wheat is a bulk commodity and the same elevators, trucks, barges, and ocean-going ships will be used to ship both kinds of wheat as well as corn, soybean, and other GMO crops. Even after a thorough cleaning, testing methods are now so precise that trace amounts of GMO material will almost always be detected in a "non-GMO" cargo. Currently, our customers have been willing to ignore this because the U.S. government provides them with a letter affirming that no GMO wheat is grown in the U.S.

After GMO wheat is released, workable tolerances must be established. These tolerances must allow for very small amounts of GMO material in non-GMO cargos. To maintain wheat exports, we must have new international agreements establishing these tolerances and a nation-wide regulatory system must be set up to enforce them.

If GMO wheat becomes available before a workable federal regulatory system is in place, growers in a county that banned GMO wheat will have difficulty selling "non-GMO" wheat. Their shipments would likely be rejected because of the trace amounts of GMO material added during shipment. Almost all customers are overseas and a completely segregated shipping system would be too expensive. I worry that county-level regulation will muddy the waters and make developing the federal system necessary to enforce the tolerances more difficult.