

Comments on HB 2674 and HB 2675

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I am the manager of West Coast Beet Seed Company. I am on the Boards of several seed associations, including the Oregon Seed Association, the Willamette Valley Specialty Seed Association, and the Oregon Seed Council. I served on the Governor's 2014 GE Task Force.

West Coast Beet Seed Company was incorporated in Oregon in 1940 by numerous shareholders who had determined that the Willamette Valley was the best location on the west coast in which to overwinter sugarbeet plants for seed harvest the following summer. Although other areas grew some seed, by the 1980's essentially all sugarbeet seed for the US was produced in the Willamette Valley. Today a large percentage of sugarbeet seed continues to be grown here.

As in all seed crops, and there are many in Oregon, genetic purity is an essential quality attribute. Productions of sugarbeet varieties since 1940 in our company have always included standards for distances of separation between sugarbeet fields, usually known as isolation distances. Seed production of the cousins of sugarbeet, Swiss chard and red beet, also began in the 1940's, initially around Woodburn, but now in many parts of the valley. This required an additional consideration of isolation distance. So, for about 75 years there has been a successful coexistence of all beet productions in the Willamette Valley.

Over the years growers and seedsmen talked to each other about maintaining adequate isolation distances between crops that could cross pollinate. In 1980 this informal communication system was formalized through the incorporation of the Willamette Valley Specialty Seed Association. The primary function of the association was to map competing seed crops for the mutual benefit of members. This model has been highly successful and has drawn world-wide attention, as evidenced by the accelerating expansion of the industry.

Because of thoughtful production guidelines that were written and revised as needed over the years, disputes are uncommon. When growers or seedsmen find themselves in conflict over any seed production, rules of arbitration are applied. In 35 years, arbitration has averaged less than one per year and has been 100% successful at resolving the conflict. One party wins and one party loses, but in all cases all have agreed to abide by the arbitration decision. In recent years the association has mapped up to about 1,200 field locations, many of which involve competing crops. In the case of our company alone, this includes about 75 growers.

When our company began production of the first deregulated genetically engineered sugarbeet seed with small plantings in 2005, our production area already was utilizing world-class guidelines that allowed a seamless transition to maintaining genetic purity for yet more trait. By 2009 the US sugar processing market was using sugarbeet seed that was resistant to the herbicide Roundup almost exclusively. During that same period the productions of Swiss chard and red beet continued locally and, if anything, became more numerous than in recent prior years. All of these beet species continue to successfully coexist. The genetic purity of all are

equally important and stray pollen or seed moving among beet productions is a risk equally shared by all types.

We all are well aware of the objections that some Oregonians hold to any and all GE traits and crops. The question for this committee regarding HB 2674 and 2675 comes down to whether or not the existing voluntary system is sufficient to preserve a mix of food, feed, and seed productions that includes crops with GE traits. From the viewpoint of seed, the answer is ‘yes’. While no system is flawless, that of the Willamette Valley Specialty Seed Association has existed for the mutual benefit of association members for 35 years. In fact, we have one member who produces exclusively organic seed. We have at least one other member who produces some organic seed, along with conventionally produced seed. We have a membership category for small seed savers that would like to participate in our mapping system, but who are not association members. In fact, we look to include these productions for the benefit of all members. West Coast Beet Seed Company has at least two growers who produce GE sugarbeets in the same farm operation that produces non-GE conventional crops and organic crops.

My view of these two House bills is that conflict resolution is moved from neighbors and the people they do business with to a state agency. If the GE Task Force was unable to reach a consensus on many aspects of coexistence, can we reasonably expect the Oregon Department of Agriculture to do better?

With so few actual conflicts, what advantage does either of these bills create for Oregon agriculture? This seems more like an opportunity for those who oppose GE traits and crops to limit those productions based on the possibility that a conflict might occur and to have the authority of state government behind them. If the new method of conflict resolution is to create control areas, which are actually zones of exclusion, this will establish many new borders along the edges of these areas. I would suggest that the number of conflicts will grow significantly. Growers who farm both inside and outside of control areas and along the borders are going to be challenged to function flawlessly. Expectations of “control” are going to gravitate toward exclusion of GE crops. Opponents of biotechnology view this favorably, while those who favor all crop types will have fewer choices based on initial control areas and the possibility that further controls will be implemented over time. We will have farmers outside of control areas that are privileged to work with their neighbors to coexist. Conversely, we will have farmers inside control areas who do not share those privileges of freedom to coexist with neighbors as they have for generations.

I oppose both HB 2674 and 2675.