

GROWING CANOLA CONTROVERSY

Canola. It sounds so harmless. Frank Morton of Wild Garden Seeds in Philomath says that the name comes from “Canadian oil,” and the moniker was devised after Canadian scientists took a plant called rapeseed and modified it to make it lower in erucic acid and thus a little more edible for animals and humans. Canola is causing a controversy among those who support local foods as well as spurring allegations about biofuels producers and suppliers such as Eugene’s SeQuential Biofuels.

The Oregon Department of Agriculture is expanding the areas where canola can be grown in the Willamette Valley — some farmers in Oregon are interested in growing canola as an energy source — but that endangers the livelihoods of specialty seed growers.

The ODA has adopted a temporary rule starting Aug. 10 that will expire in 180 days, but allows canola planting in September. Morton says that temporary rule does not allow for public comment. ODA is also going for a permanent rule that will allow public comment, but at that point canola will already have been planted — without public input, Morton says.

He says the reason that canola was known as rapeseed is “because once you have it in your field, it doesn’t go away.” He says the seed is “very, very long lasting in the soil” and spreads like a weed. If you plant canola one year, it will come up as a weed the next year. “It’s what it’s known for,” he says, and “if you’re a seed grower and your neighbors have canola, you have a big problem as a seed producer.”

The prospect of GMO (genetically modified) canola spreading into crops in the valley makes the problem even worse. The heart of the matter, Morton says is that canola seeds can cross with rutabagas, turnips, some kales and other vegetable crops. It doesn’t just affect the seed industry; it also affects red clover growers.

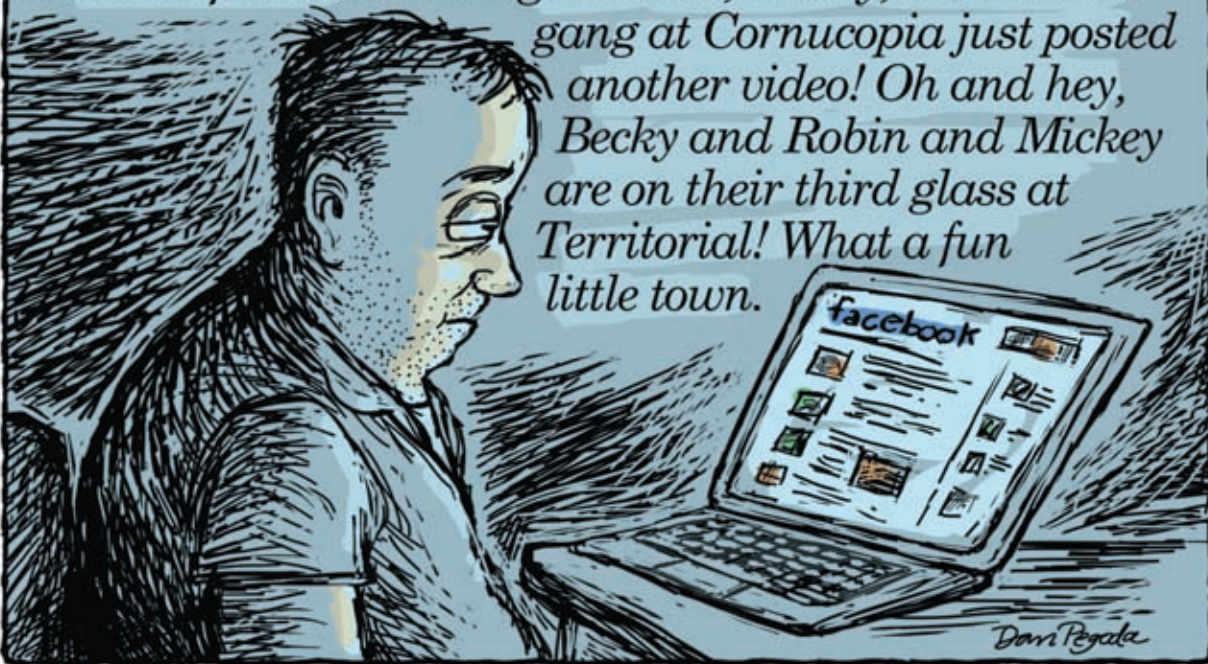
According to 2010 ODA data, Oregon’s specialty seed industry is worth more than \$32 million. Canola is worth \$2.5 million. Morton says that the seed industry sales are generated on only 10,000 acres, while canola takes many more thousands of acres to turn any sort of profit. Oregon sells its seeds to other countries whose seed crops are already contaminated by canola, Morton says.

At an Oregon House Agriculture Committee meeting in 2010 when the canola issue came up, according to the agriculture newspaper *Capital Press* Dan Hilburn, director of the ODA’s plant division, said that during phone calls to an international panel of seed-production experts, “the department heard over and over again to be careful.” The newspaper reported that Hilburn told the committee, “All these people knew about the Willamette Valley. They said, ‘That’s a very special place. Don’t blow it.’”

So Morton wants to know why the ODA would want to bring canola in and risk an agricultural industry that brings

Something Eugene!

Golly, look. Rodney’s at Red Agave! And Jill and Benny are with friends at Perugino! And, oh boy, the karaoke gang at Cornucopia just posted another video! Oh and hey, Becky and Robin and Mickey are on their third glass at Territorial! What a fun little town.



Oregon international recognition. He says a three-year study by Oregon State University scientists that was completed in 2009 showed that canola “was a one-way street,” and that they would not advise introducing canola to the valley because there were risks to seed industry.

Some have speculated that the demand for biofuels might be part of what is spurring the ODA to change the 3.7 million acre canola restriction zone that goes from Portland to Springfield. Ian Hill, CEO & co-founder of SeQuential Biofuels, says this demand to plant canola in the valley is not coming from SeQuential, and the business flatly does not support GMO canola.

“No, we’re not in support of GMO, period,” Hill says, and he adds that SeQuential does not and will not purchase GMO oils. The rumors may have started because Thomas Endicott, a SeQuential founding partner who left in 2008, is now part of the Willamette Biomass Processors in Rickreall, and there has been further speculation that WBP would process GMO canola. However, the facility is Oregon Tilth-certified for organics, Endicott says. He says WBP has been GMO-free since 2008 and at least one of its companies, whose seeds Willamette Biomass processes, purchases its seeds in Europe to ensure they are GMO-free.

The Oregon ag department has said in a press release that “the rule does not address the production of genetically modified canola within the protected district” because genetically modified canola “has been deregulated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.”

Hill says he feels the dialogue that has started over the canola issue is important, and while SeQuential has supported the ODA in the past in looking at oil seed crops that could be grown locally in the Willamette Valley, the

company would only support crops that wouldn’t hurt others. Hill says SeQuential has let ODA know it will not purchase GMO crops.

SeQuential is in favor of moving from Oregon importing petroleum to growing its energy in state, Hill says. He says the company focuses on waste stream-based energy such as cooking oil for biodiesel and sugar water waste from fruit drying for ethanol. Growing energy crops in conjunction with our food system is a long-term goal, Hill says, but “it’s a terribly difficult problem that will take years to unravel.”

Endicott, who was part of the advisory group that discussed the changes to the planting restrictions, says that the new planting zones are on the edges of the valley where high, dryland farmers want to rotate canola into their crops. Morton says the problem there is that growers of red clover in those areas could be affected by canola and its spread as well as the pests and diseases that accompany it.

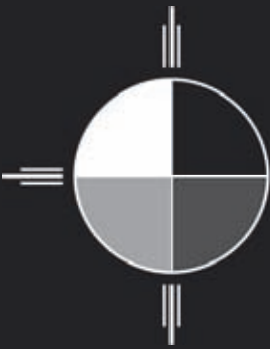
Morton objects to the process by which the decision to change the planting zones came about. He says, “We are a world-class seed production area,” and he doesn’t want to see the “beautiful nest befouled by a plant that could become a roadside weed.”

He says the seed growers were basically told canola was going to be planted and the seed growers’ cooperation was wanted. “That’s like sort of like asking someone for permission to have a camel sleep in your bed,” he says. “It’s not collaboration if you have a gun held to your head.”

“If we are to continue to exist, we have to resist the introduction of canola in the valley. That’s the mantra,” Morton says.

For more on the canola issue, visit wkly.ws/1c4

— Camilla Mortensen




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