

BIOTECHNOLOGY

Aussie farmers seek ruling on GM seed contamination

A court case underway in Perth, Australia, where an organic farmer is suing his neighbour for allegedly contaminating his farm with genetically modified (GM) canola seed, is being closely watched by GM seed companies.

"The court decision will affect the entire agricultural sector in Australia," said Magda du Toit, corporate communication manager for Monsanto sub-Saharan Africa.

MARSH WANTS THE COURT TO STOP BAXTER FROM GROWING GM CROPS

Steve Marsh, an organic oats, rye and sheep farmer, alleged that his neighbour, Michael Baxter, had failed to prevent GM canola seeds from blowing onto his pastures in 2010. This had cost him his organic certification on over half his farm and blocked him from exporting his crop as organic, according to *Perth Now*.

Marsh was seeking compensation for loss of earnings estimated at AU\$85 000 (R845 000) and wanted the court to prevent Baxter from growing GM crops on his farm.

Monsanto said that seed companies and farming systems needed to continue working together to ensure that no farmer was exposed to unnecessary economic risk.

"Any farmer has a responsibility to take reasonable steps to stop their farming activities from affecting their neighbours' or public land. That applies across the

board and is not unique to GM crops," Du Toit said.

African Centre for Biosafety executive director Mariam Mayet said there were no reported cases of GM contamination leading to socio-economic harm in South Africa. Added to this, most maize and soya grown commercially in this country were already GM, and GM canola had a *de facto* ban on it because of its "promiscuous" nature, which saw it outcross to other species.

"Similarly, the release of GM sorghum has also been opposed. SA authorities have been rigorous in regard to new GM food crops being grown commercially. Our issues in South Africa are more about the loss of choice for GM-free products and about the failure of GM technology," Mayet said.

Du Toit said the industry had asked Monsanto to test GM canola but it had decided not to, as the wild radish (*Rhaphanus sp.*) weed, which is remotely related to canola, was in the Western Cape.

"Even if the possibility of cross-pollination is very slight, we decided not to consider GM canola for South Africa until there's more clarity about this."

Du Toit said SA maize farmers had had years of production experience in managing possible cross-pollination between white and yellow maize. This was achieved by managing pollination windows, using different hybrids with a different maturity, and looking at distances between lands.

"The same principle is followed for farmers planting GM and non-GM maize," Du Toit said. – Robyn Joubert