Speech to the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food
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Ted Zettel - Organic Federation of Canada

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for inviting me to speak to you today on the important topic of biotechnology and its impact on organic agriculture and food, from the perspective of the organic sector.

My name is Ted Zettel and I am a third generation dairy farmer from Chepstow here in Ontario. Twenty years ago I participated in the founding of Organic Meadow, a farmers' cooperative, which is now the leading brand of organic dairy products in Canada. I am the President of the Organic Federation of Canada, the organization which represents the sector to the Canadian government on regulatory issues. I also sit on the Organic Value Chain Round Table and have worked in consultation with its task force on Genetic Engineering in preparing these comments today.

A very big part of my life has been dedicated to providing good food for my family, my community, and the people across Canada who want organic products for their families. I have made my living developing and providing for organic markets, and teaching fellow farmers about the methods of cultivation and livestock husbandry which are needed to satisfy this growing consumer demand. There are approximately 3,900 certified organic farmers across the nation similarly engaged and dedicated to organic production.

In June of 2009, the organic sector saw the implementation of the Canadian Organic Regulation. The new Act regulates the term "organic" and requires all organic production and processing to conform to a federally legislated national standard and verification process. Since that time, Canada has negotiated an equivalency agreement with the U.S. and is in the process of negotiating similar standards recognition agreements with Europe and Japan, the major global organic markets.

In 2008 the organic sector in Canada was worth about $2 billion in retail sales (Holmes and Macey 2010). Although growth in organic sales was slowed by the 2008 recession, it is still the case that annual sales growth of organic food products outstrips retail growth of any other food category today, at a current annual rate of growth of about 8% in North America (down from 20% pre-recession). Close to 3 million acres of farmland in Canada are managed organically, including transitional and pasture land.

Global organic sales have gone from about $15 billion in 1999 to $51 billion by 2008—that's over three hundred percent growth in less than a decade! North America has been leading this growth in recent years and now organic products represent 3.5% of all food and drink sales. Organics is an important segment of

the national and global economy and it is poised to continue to grow, and to continue to appeal to the millions who want to buy food that has been produced without synthetic chemicals, in harmony with nature, and without GMOs.

Yes, without GMOs. The use of genetic engineering in organic agriculture is prohibited in all organic standards, worldwide. While there are some differences between countries on the issue of adventitious presence threshold levels, or allowable limits of accidental presence of GMO materials in an organic crop, the industry is clear and unanimous in prohibiting their intentional use. Many consumers who wish to avoid consuming products containing GMOs reach for organic for that reason—and because the law does not require foods with GMOs to be labeled, it is really the best way for people to ensure that what they are eating is GM free.

So I stand before you today to speak on behalf of, not only myself, my family, and my company, but on behalf of hundreds of farmers and millions of consumers across the country who wish to choose organic and GMO-free food: Consider our rights, our choices, our desires, and our livelihoods when you deliberate upon policies which will determine the course of the future development of genetic engineering of plants in Canada.

What does our industry need to flourish? What do organic consumers and producers want in relation to GMOs, and why?

Well first of all, let me emphasize that organic agriculture proponents believe that the most effective biological technology is the technology that can work ***without*** genetic manipulation. From a historical perspective, genetic manipulation as it is currently practiced is essentially a new frontier with yet unknown and potentially harmful long-term health and environmental consequences.

The most effective biological innovations that will protect against weeds, pests and diseases, build soil biological health and diversity, and produce healthy, nutritious food are encompassed by organic production techniques. If you ask us, we will say, invest in the research that will reduce the use of fossil fuel derived inputs and reliance upon dwindling oil reserves. Invest in the research that will lower the agricultural carbon footprint and energy use. Invest in the research that builds up our most precious resource, soil and soil microbiology. We applaud Agriculture and Agrifood Canada's involvement in the Organic Science Cluster to the tune of $6.5 million, which will further essential studies of these areas of knowledge. All of these avenues of developing agricultural practice build self-reliance within the farming community and contribute to long term resiliency for the food system.

Do GMOs do this? No. To date, all genetically modified crops have been designed either to withstand chemical applications (Roundup Ready) or to contain pesticide in the plant itself (Bacillus Thuringiensis). Although 14 years

ago the promise of GMOs was to reduce chemical use, studies have shown that in fact, pesticide use on corn and soybeans has continued to increase (Dr. Charles Benbrook). We must be honest in assessing the effect GE technologies have had on agriculture. The trend toward simplification of cropping systems, dependency on outside, resource-heavy inputs which is accelerated by the use of these tools does not place Canada in a better position to respond to the challenges of the future.

Regardless of the current or future intentions of genetic modification, the technology continues to be opposed by Canada's non-GMO and organic markets in North America, Europe, and Japan, and will continue to pose a problem for organic and non-GMO producers.

So organic producers and consumers are at odds with the promises of biotechnology. Although it is clear that biotech crops make a lot of money for the biotech companies, the benefit to farmers or consumers is extremely dubious even in the short term. It is also clear that GMOs don't make any money for the organic sector and, in fact, cause harm when GM plants and seeds stray into organic fields and seed supplies.

Although the numbers demonstrate the organic industry is robust and growing, it is still true that organic sales and acreage are vastly outnumbered by the conventional and biotech industries. The organic sector recognizes this reality. However, our opposition to GM production and the expansion of GM technologies remains firm. We are convinced that our position is shared by a majority of Canadians and that, as the detrimental effects of genetic modification of plants become more apparent, the opposition to their continued use will become insurmountable.

Therefore, I would like to outline what we would consider to be the **principles and parameters for establishing an agricultural policy that can be embraced by Canadians.**

It will be a policy through which our government chooses to uphold the rights of minorities through democratic engagement and to protect an innovative, highly valued and rapidly expanding sector of the food system which will be vital to coping with the coming era of resource scarcity and ecological uncertainty.

It will be a policy where people, health, and ecology are the paramount consideration.

It will be a policy in which the people and the government work towards respecting the existence of non-GMO agricultural production systems. It can no longer be tolerated that GMO crops continue to proliferate and spread into and contaminate non-GMO and organic fields and crops without any recourse for non-GMO grower compensation. Existence of both GMO and non-GMO

agriculture means that each system must maintain integrity and take responsibility.

These are the principles upon which we propose this policy be built:

Principle One: Organic agriculture is a production system with answers to many ecological and health challenges. Organics has a lower carbon footprint, uses less energy, builds soil, conserves biodiversity, protects our water, and produces products with lower chemical residues and in some cases higher nutritional value. Consumers want organic products both locally and in export markets. ***Organic agriculture is an important facet of the Canadian economy and cultural mosaic. It must be protected.***

Principle Two: Organic consumers and markets expect organic products to be GMO-free. ***Products of organic agriculture lose their value if they are mixed with GMOs beyond the level acceptable by target markets. GMO contamination is an unacceptable harm that must be mitigated and avoided.***

Principle Three: Organic agriculture is the gold standard for traceability, segregation, and identity preservation. It already uses buffer zones and the regulations require strict vigilance on using cleaned and inspected handling equipment, including testing and additional measures to keep GMO seeds out of organic crops. This effort costs money and this cost should not be borne solely by the organic sector, who did not cause the problem**.** ***Costs and measures for ensuring successful and respectful existence of both farming systems should also be borne by biotech users and biotech developers. This includes biotech farmers employing buffer strips and identity preservation. Best management practices should be verified and enforced through inspection for biotech crop users.***

Principle Four: Developers and users of GE crops should be held liable for their escape. When organic farmers' crops are found to have high levels of GE presence, they cannot sell their crop organically and may lose their organic certification. Loss of certification causes not just a loss for one year, but three. ***Biotech companies and farmers growing GMO crops should compensate organic farmers for financial losses due to adventitious presence of GMO plants and seeds.***

Principle Five*: Commercialization of GE crops should not be allowed without a full assessment of potential impact to the environment, health, and farmers' socio-economic well-being, which includes market acceptance and the freedom to save seed.* In this regard, we cannot fail to comment on the imminent risk to the entire organic production system posed by the specter of GE alfalfa. Not only is organic alfalfa exported as an organic feed, it is also integral to the organic livestock and dairy sector—the value chain to

which so much of our commerce is tied—and is also an essential in the crop rotation of most organic farms. To compromise alfalfa does not compromise only a limited forage commodity. Alfalfa is grown in virtually every agricultural region from coast to coast. From the organic sector's perspective, the possible introduction of a GE variety undermines our entire system of production. We urge you in the strongest terms to delay this commercialization until a full examination of the economic consequences is completed.

Principle Six*: Consumers have the right to know if a food contains products of GE, so labeling of food derived from GE crops should be mandatory.*

The widespread opposition to the introduction of genetically engineered plants and animals into the food chain for human consumption is often characterized as groundless fear, based on ignorance. It would be unwise for you as legislators to accept this conclusion, without carefully listening to the objections of many well informed Canadians, who recognize that the reach of science, and by extension the conclusions arrived at through scientific enquiry are constantly changing. Particularly in the field of ecology, our knowledge is still in its infancy, and it is reasonable and prudent to exercise caution, before introducing into the environment, organisms that reproduce and spread their unnaturally acquired characteristics, perhaps changing the balance of ecosystems within which our agricultural systems subsist, in ways that cannot be predicted. And for what? Canada does not need another Roundup Ready species. Within the organic food community we understand the protest against GMO's in food as a reasonable, rational response, arrived at after intelligently weighing the risks and benefits to society. We ask you to let the consumer's voice have its rightful effect, by implementing mandatory labeling of food derived from GE crops.

I thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective with you today, and the perspective of the organic agriculture and food community, on how to work towards a future of flourishing agricultural innovation and the existence of diverse production systems which protect and enhance our resources, while capitalizing on new economic opportunity and meeting the changing preferences of our people.

I would be pleased to answer any questions. Thank you.

Ted Zettel
President,
Organic Federation of Canada