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Petition response called regrettable

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Star Reporter

Organic farmer Tom Rudge says he's disappointed with the response to his petition calling for a moratorium on genetically-engineered crops in the territory by Energy, Mines and Resource Minister Archie Lang.

Lang tabled his response to the 1,500-signature petition in the legislature Monday.

While Lang said the government will continue gathering information and consider the views of Yukoners in any decisions the government makes, he didn't commit to a moratorium.

"We will explore the possibility of the distinct labelling of genetically- engineered-free products on our store shelves so that consumers can make informed decisions about whether or not to buy genetically-engineered products," he said.

He spoke after stating there's been no definitive determination that genetically-engineered crops would cause irreversible harm to the natural environment.

"It hurts when they say it's not going to be any big deal up in the Yukon," Rudge told reporters after listening to Lang's response.

The Yukon remains one of the last jurisdictions in the Americas not to have genetically-engineered crops grown here, he pointed out.

While Lang said no genetically-engineered crops are suitable for the Yukon's growing conditions or market place, Rudge argued some such crops can indeed grow in the territory.

"They just sort of said: 'Yeah, we'll look at that, but we're not going to jump on the wagon,'" Rudge said.

In the meantime, as the government looks at it, anyone could start planting the genetically-engineered seeds in the territory. As he noted, the petition only called for a moratorium — not a ban — while the issue was looked at.

"Meanwhile, they just sort of kiboshed that and now anybody can bring this stuff in," he argued.

Saying the moratorium would be a "precautionary principle", Rudge would like to see the territory become the one jurisdiction which held off until further research was done.

He acknowledged however, that eventually he would like to see the crops banned.

The presence of such crops could put Rudge, a certified organic farmer, out of business, he said. Genetically- engineered crops could end up contaminating his own produce;

"If you're willing to sign an affidavit or something saying I can sue you for contaminating my field, that's fine, but nobody would be willing to do that," he said.

There have been no long-term studies done to determine whether there are any health risks in consuming genetically-engineered food.

Studies on the subject have been short-term or have come from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Rudge commented. .

The issue with FDA research is that there's a huge amount of "co-operation" between big seed companies and the FDA, he suggested.

"It's frustrating," he said.

With more than 1,500 signatures on the petition, it seems Yukoners want the moratorium and are interested in knowing what they're eating.

"I think there's a huge ground-swell of interest from people," he said pointing out James MacKinnon, author of The 100-Mile Diet, was recently in town. The book focuses on eating more local food.

In the last six years as well, local organic growers have been supporting the local market, he said.

The territory should "step up to the plate" and take action on genetically-engineered crops, he said.

Lang acknowledged a genetically-engineered-free zone may provide a niche market for Yukon agriculture.

"Concerns raised about genetically-engineered crops may provide an opportunity to sell non-genetically-engineered products to a specific market," Lang said.

"On the other hand, this may limit our crop options in the future. Most of the research being conducted on crop yields and management in Canada now focuses on genetically-engineered, crops. New plant development will likely come from this technology."

The minister concluded his response by noting the government's support for the agriculture industry.