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Book Review

**Growing Resistance: Canadian Farmers and the Politics
of Genetically Modified Wheat**

Emily Eaton

University of Manitoba Press, 2013: 208 pages

Review by Taarini Chopra (Canadian Biotechnology Action Network)

The short history of genetically modified (GM) crops in Canada has been defined by controversy, debates about health and environmental concerns, and deeply entrenched corporate control. The past fifteen years have seen numerous approvals of new GM crop varieties, while just a handful have been stopped from reaching the market. One of these unusual cases is the subject of Emily Eaton's new book *Growing Resistance*.

In this compelling volume, Eaton questions why the introduction of GM wheat was met with such strong opposition from Canadian farmers, while GM canola had been widely adopted just a decade earlier. Her analysis goes beyond a cost-benefit assessment of the two crops to include their biological differences, and dig into the rich historical and cultural role that wheat has played for Prairie farmers. Taken together, Eaton argues, these factors explain the fervent public opposition to the introduction of GM wheat in the Prairies, and Monsanto's consequent decision to withdraw its request for government approval of herbicide tolerant wheat and discontinue its research and breeding program.¹

Eaton is an assistant professor of Geography at the University of Regina, who specializes in political economy. Her book is based on her doctoral dissertation, and much of the information in it came from interviews with the various groups involved in opposing GM wheat, as well with scientists, industry organizations and government officials.

Eaton begins with an outline of the historical contexts of wheat and canola, and follows this with an explanation of biotechnology regulation in Canada. She then moves on to a fascinating section that reveals how both crops have shaped the agrarian and rural identity in this country just as much as that identity has in turn shaped the evolution of canola and wheat

¹ The company did, however, re-launch research on GM wheat in 2009.

cultivation. These chapters set the stage for the next two, in which Eaton examines the ways in which the central coalition of organizations that opposed GM wheat effectively shaped their narrative.

Eaton argues that producer concerns, such as access to export markets and agronomic viability were prominent in the campaign, but were articulated through issues often thought of as being consumer-driven. Her own stance is perhaps most evident in her exploration of the ways in which the coalition countered the idea put forward by GM wheat proponents, that consumers should have decision-making power over the fate of GM wheat by voting with their dollars in the marketplace. In what is perhaps the strongest section of the book, Eaton discusses the differences between collective decision-making and neoliberal ideas of individual choice in relation to 'governmentality', and specifically farmer engagement in political processes as active actors instead of merely consumers.

Each chapter begins with a summary of the relevant theoretical literature, drawing on geographers, sociologists, political economists and historians, and then goes on to explain Eaton's analysis. Her arguments are sprinkled with quotes from interviews, news articles from the Canadian farm press, and testimonies to parliamentary standing committees.

Eaton's analysis is particularly interesting in the context of a parallel struggle in the current Canadian agricultural and political landscape: Farmers' efforts to keep Roundup Ready Alfalfa off the market. Despite the many similarities between the two crops, and fierce opposition to the introduction of GM alfalfa from both farmers and consumers, it has been approved and registered, and may well be commercialized in the very near future. Eaton foreshadows such decisions towards the end of the book, when she recognizes a number of elements that make it improbable that the rejection of GM wheat can be reproduced with equal success in the case of other crops. The most important of these elements is the continuing threat posed by growing corporate control of the seed supply and agriculture, and Eaton emphasizes the need for future struggles against GM crops to focus on this central and influential factor.

The book is written in refreshingly clear and jargon-free language, without losing the nuances of a set of very thoughtful arguments. Eaton draws on a range of theoretical backgrounds while still being firmly rooted in the empirical story she is studying. This book is a must-read for students and researchers, as well as anyone interested in the history of agrarian questions in Canada, the changing role of producers and farmers in our society, and the various dimensions of the debates around GM crops in Canada.

While most of the book explores the political and economic situation in 2001, the conclusion jumps forward to 2009, when Canadian flax shipments were rejected by the European Union because they were found to be contaminated with GM flax. This incident had severe impacts for flax farmers in Canada, and underlined the risks of GM contamination and its threat to market access.

Though too recent to be included in the book, this risk has recently played out in a way that is even more closely related to Eaton's story. In July 2013, a US farmer found GM wheat growing in his field in Oregon. This was surprising for a couple of reasons. One, there is no GM wheat being commercially grown in the US, or for that matter, anywhere in the world. Two, the last time this variety was field-tested in the US was in 2005. Neither the US government, nor Monsanto, the company that owns the GM wheat variety, were able to explain how that contamination occurred. Export markets in Asia temporarily shut their doors to US wheat, and the price of wheat took a hit after the news, adding a grim layer of reality to the farmer concerns Eaton captured in her book some years earlier.

Although *Growing Resistance* focuses largely on a story that played out over a decade ago, it clearly remains both relevant and timely, and is a valuable contribution to a debate that is far from over.

Taarini Chopra is a researcher and campaigner with the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network. She is also the publications coordinator at Seeds of Diversity Canada, a researcher with the Global Food Politics Group at the University of Waterloo, and the co-chair of the Waterloo Region Food Systems Roundtable. Her graduate research compared two policy decisions on GM crops in India – the resistance to, and consequent rejection of GM eggplant, and the approval and widespread adoption of GM cotton.