

Hearing brings out both sides of canola controversy

By Mitch Lies

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SALEM -- Clint Lindsey, formerly of A2R Farms in Corvallis and once a supporter of canola production, said he came to regret his efforts to grow the crop in Oregon's Willamette Valley.

"What we did not understand at that time was the havoc that commercial scale cultivation of canola would bring to the Willamette Valley," Lindsey said.

"After many conversations with neighboring farmers, we realized that we were putting many of them at risk to contamination," he said.

Lindsey's testimony Jan. 23 in a hearing on a proposal to allow expanded canola production in the Willamette Valley brought applause from an audience mostly opposed to the proposal.

"We regret our efforts to bring commercial scale cultivation of canola to the valley," Lindsey said.

"We reject any attempts to allow canola cultivation in this valley. We ask that the growers in favor of growing canola seek an alternative that does not harm their neighbors and the valley," he said.

The Oregon Department of Agriculture has proposed allowing up to 2,500 acres of canola production in the Willamette Valley each year. Except for a sliver of land on the outskirts, the department currently prohibits canola production in the valley.

Under the proposal, farmers must obtain a permit to produce the crop and follow management guidelines designed to minimize its potential to harm other crops.

Supporters of the proposal said they believe the rule offers protection for specialty seed growers and others who fear canola will increase disease, insect and weed pressure in the valley.

"For the most part the rule supports free market agriculture in the Willamette Valley," said Matt Crawford, a Polk County farmer and president of the Willamette Valley Oilseed Producers Association.

"It allows farmers to decide what is agronomical and economical for each of their farms. It also offers protection for those farmers currently involved in the specialty seed industry," he said.

Crawford called for ODA to increase the proposed cap to 10,000 acres.

Kathy Hadley, who, like Lindsey, grew canola in the mid-2000s as part of an Oregon State University experiment, said she had "tremendous success" growing the crop.

"The grass seed fields that we've had following those research fields have had no issues with canola showing up in them," she said in her testimony.

"We had tremendous success with it as a rotation," Hadley said. "That is what growers are looking for: To raise canola as a rotation. Not to have it wall to wall, not to take over our farms."

Roger Beyer, executive director of the Oregon Seed Council, testified that the council supports an annual production cap of 750 acres in the Willamette Valley under the premise the state should move slowly into canola production.

"We believe the unknowns are what is driving a lot of this concern, and the department must move slowly to answer these unknowns," he said.

"That is the key, to move slowly. And that is why we support an acreage cap of 750 acres, not 2,500 acres," Beyer said.

The department hopes to have a final decision on its proposal before the end of February, ODA spokesman Bruce Pokarney said.