

Canola growing area expands, introducing a seed nightmare to the Willamette Valley

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By Frank Morton

Oregon's Department of Agriculture has made good on its determination to shrink the Willamette Valley canola control district, despite ongoing objections from Willamette Valley specialty seed growers, seed companies, clover growers and the state Clover Commission, fresh-market vegetable producers, organic growers and Oregon Tilth, the state's largest certifier of organic crops. Each group has its own specific objections to canola. These concerns include genetic cross-contamination of specialty brassica seeds, increased insect and disease problems, and weed issues that in turn contaminate clover, grass and vegetable seeds with canola seed that cannot be sorted out from other seed. Organic farmers and certifiers are doubly concerned about the introduction of genetically modified canola, as this opens up multiple routes for contamination of organic foods through seed, animal feed and pasturage.

This ODA decision is a turnaround to its 2009 determination that canola production represents a substantial risk to the specialty seed industry in the Willamette Valley, an industry worth more than \$32 million with a global reach. After a three-year study involving Oregon State University scientists and specialists in agronomy, weeds, insects, diseases and genetic drift, ODA Director Katy Coba ordered that a protected zone be established to keep canola production out of the area traditionally covered by the Willamette Valley Specialty Seed Association's seed isolation maps and associated rules. The 2009 rule contained a clause requiring the agency to review the rule at the end of 2012.

Instead, in spring of 2012 the ODA notified the specialty seed industry that it wished to reconvene the canola advisory committee and hoped to find opportunities for Willamette Valley growers to produce canola within the protected zone. Have any of the hazards of growing canola changed?

In a news release Aug. 3, Coba said, "We are adopting a temporary rule to allow Willamette Valley growers to make important planting decisions by the first of September as requested by both specialty seed and canola growers." In fact, specialty seed growers did not request a Sept. 1 decision -- only canola proponents made this demand. This timing and the "temporary" rule will allow canola growers to plant their crop before a public hearing can be held on the issue. It is unclear why the ODA would jeopardize its credibility to favor unnamed growers of a low-value commodity when the original rule required massive public review; the stakeholders are so many and the damage is permanent.

This press release does not explain why the ODA has reversed the protections created with the 2009 rule. OSU scientists who were part of the three-year canola study advising the 2009 decision were not even notified by the ODA that canola was back on the table for introduction into the Willamette Valley. By all appearances, this decision was political -- not agronomic, scientific or caused by any emergency.

For the Willamette Valley specialty seed industry with its heavy emphasis on valuable brassica seed crops being grown for a global customer base, coexistence with canola production is a question of survival with a bad prognosis.

During the 2009 hearings, seed company representatives were called in from all over the world to convey their experiences with canola introductions to their own (former) seed production areas. Dan Hilburn, the ODA plant division administrator, led the canola advisory committee that established the canola control district around the Willamette Valley in 2009. Hilburn, addressing a meeting of the specialty seed association in January 2012, emphasized in his comments that he can still hear one of those voices over the phone saying, "You there in Oregon have yourselves a jewel. Don't blow it."

Frank Morton is the owner of Wild Garden Seeds in Philomath.