

House Committee on Rules – May 23, 2017 at 3:00 PM

Testimony from Barbara Richard in support of HB 2739

As a retired software developer, I have an appreciation for intellectual property, which includes patents, and believe it deserves protection. So when a plant breeder develops and patents a new plant variety, I understand the desire to protect it.

Why does this bill focus on Genetically Engineered plants? Not because GE crops are patented. Many types of plants are patented, but others don't create problems with a farmer's crop.

It's all about economics. There are many markets, domestic and abroad, that are sensitive to the presence of GE material. Some even have a zero tolerance for it. Numerous crops that have been contaminated by GE crops have been rejected in the marketplace, resulting in billions of dollars of lost revenue and damages.

When a farmer plants a GE crop, even if that farmer is diligent in his farming practices, seed or pollen may still escape and cross pollinate a non-GE crop. This could happen, for example, as a result of a weather event – something the farmer has no control over. If farmers are held responsible for those damages, we are pitting farmer against farmer. The GE patent holder stands to benefit when all goes well. It makes sense that the GE patent holder should be held responsible when things go awry.

Parts of Eastern Oregon are now infested with Roundup Ready GE creeping bent grass that escaped from field trials in Idaho. Jerry Erstrom, who is chairman of the Malheur County Weed Board, was unable to be here today, but has submitted testimony that gives more detail about the GE bent grass situation. It has created and continues to create problems for farmers and irrigation districts. These genetically engineered seeds are now in drainage ditches, as well as the Snake River, which flows into the Columbia. And that's just one mode of travel. Pollen from GE bent grass can cross pollinate and hybridize with wild relatives, as it spreads across the state putting Oregon's billion dollar grass seed industry at risk.

This GE bent grass story will not have a happy ending. As it spreads, there will be more costs to farmers, irrigation districts, even the State. As an Oregon taxpayer, I urge you to support HB 2739. The state of Oregon needs to lead the way and pass this bill.

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