



THE RAM'S HORN

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Caution: neoliberalism at work

There are two stories to be told. The cruelest story is about globalized neoliberalism, corporate profits, speculative 'investment' and the chaos and failure of industrial agriculture as a result. The other story is about the possible turning of the tide on the neoliberal project.

All livestock farmers are familiar with parasites, internal and external, and many are also familiar with foxes (as in the henhouse), coyotes and other predators. A vigorous animal can cope with a light infestation of parasites, but even the otherwise healthiest of animals can be brought low by a heavy parasite burden, and an animal so consumed is obviously unable to provide milk or meat. Agriculture itself has long had to deal with parasites and predators of one sort or another. Sometimes they are slick seed dealers, other times shrewd livestock drovers. Now there seem to be increasing infestations of investors and attacks by fertilizer and land predators.

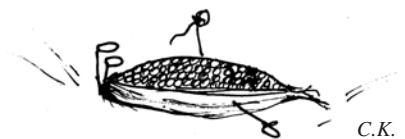
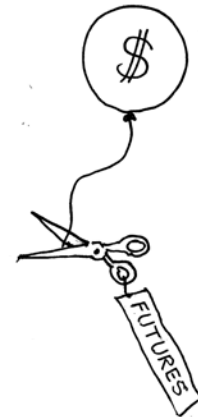
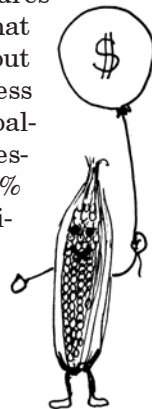
In Saskatchewan, limited partnerships that can give you part ownership of a portfolio of agricultural land have moved in. These pooled investor funds use the money to buy farmland, which is then leased back to farmers. "There is potential for considerable capital gains" and the lease payments generate income that is paid out to unit holders – less any fees deducted. – *GM*, 21/4/08. Former provincial Minister of Agriculture Tim Carroll has also suggested the scheme to the beleaguered farmers of PEI.

According to figures compiled by commodities brokerage Gresham Investment Management, the amount of speculative money in commodities futures – that is, investors such as big funds that don't buy or sell the physical commodity but merely bet on price movements – was less than \$5-billion in 2000. Last year, it ballooned to roughly \$175-billion. By some estimates, investment funds control 50% of the wheat traded on the Chicago Board of Trade and

Chicago Mercantile Exchange, the world's biggest commodity markets. – *G&M*, 25/4/08

At an April 22nd meeting convened by the US Commodity Futures Trading Commission, many farmers and commodity buyers suggested that it is the growing clout of financial speculators, like large index funds and hedge funds, that has generated unpredictable gyrations in the futures market. Some producers blamed these large speculators for causing a disconnect between the value of a futures contract and the underlying value of the asset [a particular commodity] it is supposed to represent. – *G&M*, 23/4/08

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C.K.

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The Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC) is an independent agency of the US Government with the mandate to regulate commodity futures and option markets in the United States. In 1974 the majority of futures trading took place in the agricultural sector, but since then "the futures industry has become increasingly varied . . . and today encompasses a vast array of highly complex financial futures contracts." The CFTC "assures the economic utility of the futures markets by encouraging their competitiveness and efficiency, protecting market participants against fraud, manipulation, and abusive trading practices, and by ensuring the financial integrity of the clearing process. Through effective oversight, the CFTC enables the futures markets to serve the important function of providing a means for price discovery and offsetting price risk." —www.cftc.gov/aboutthecftc/index.htm

For more information on futures contracts, see www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Futures_contract

Until quite recently speculation in agricultural commodities (grains, oilseeds, pork bellies) was limited by the rules of the Commodities Futures Trading Commission in the US (see box above). Only those classed as farmers and food companies were eligible to trade in agricultural commodities. Then a couple of years ago the CFTC changed its rules to allow commodity trading by market speculators. The change meant that a mechanism that was supposed to help farmers and the food industry to 'discover' prices and manage risk was opened to speculators with no particular interest in the welfare of farmers or agricultural commodities.

This resulted in purely profit-seeking trading activities driving up prices, which in turn forced countries dependent on imported food staples to bid up prices even further in order to obtain their essential food imports.

"Investors fleeing Wall Street's mortgage-related strife plowed hundreds of millions of dollars into grain futures, driving prices up. . . By Christmas, a global panic was building. With fewer places to turn, and tempted by the weaker US dollar, nations staged a run on the US wheat harvest. Foreign buyers, who typically seek to purchase one or two months' supply of wheat at a time, suddenly began to stockpile. This led major domestic U.S. mills to jump into the fray with their own massive orders, fearing that there would soon be no wheat left at any price. Japan, the Philippines, [South] Korea, Taiwan – they all came in with huge orders, and no matter how high prices go, they keep on buying."

– *StarTribune, Washington Post, 28/4/08*

"Has it ever been better for Cargill? Not likely. At \$471,611 an hour, Cargill posts a fine quarter," reported Cargill's hometown newspaper, the Star-Tribune. That hourly income figure is based on the billion dollar profit the company made in the first quarter of this year (\$1.03 billion to be exact).

Cargill CEO Greg Page noted that "Demand for food in developing economies and for energy worldwide is boosting demand for agricultural goods, at the same time that investment monies have streamed into commodity markets." A Cargill spokeswoman said that food shortages have strengthened Cargill's call for free trade: "It's very important that food be allowed to move from places where there is a surplus to places where there is a need." — *ST, 15/4/08*

India has halted trading in futures contracts on key food items. Trading in foods such as soybean oil, potatoes and chick peas, along with rubber, is suspended for at least four months. — *NYT, 08/8/08*

And now for the good news:

"Business as usual is no longer an option"

The final report of the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) was released in mid-April. The report took four years to complete and included input from 400 scientists, academics and researchers from 100 countries.

"The old paradigm of industrial, energy-intensive and toxic agriculture is a concept of the past," the IAASTD said in a news release. "The key message of the report is that small-scale farmers and agro-ecological methods provide the way forward to avert the current food crisis and meet the needs of local communities."

Fifty-seven governments approved the report. Only the now customary misguided four, the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom have not signed on (though the UK is reported to be considering it). As might be expected, the report was also not welcomed by the agrotroxin-biotech industry and its lobby organizations. "To be quite frank we see the report as very superficial and negative," said Lorne Hepworth of CropLife Canada (which had participated in the process but then withdrew). The report, he says, fails to recognize the yield-boosting potential of crop protection products, hybrid seeds and GM crops, which the industry claims goes to the heart of the hunger and poverty issues.

The assessment concluded that the practice of large-scale industrial monoculture agriculture is unsustainable and cannot provide food for the future.

From the Global Summary

“The International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) responds to the widespread realization that despite significant scientific and technological achievements in our ability to increase agricultural productivity, we have been less attentive to some of the unintended social and environmental consequences of our achievements. We are now in a good position to reflect on these consequences and to outline various policy options to meet the challenges ahead, perhaps best characterized as the need for food and livelihood security under increasingly constrained environmental conditions from within and outside the realm of agriculture and globalized economic systems.”

“If we do persist with business as usual, the world’s people cannot be fed over the next half-century. It will mean more environmental degradation, and the gap between the haves and have-nots will further widen. We have an opportunity now to marshal our intellectual resources to avoid that sort of future. Otherwise we face a world no one would want to inhabit.” – Professor Robert Watson, Director of the IAASTD Secretariat

“The IAASTD is unique in the history of agricultural science assessments, in that it assesses both formal science and technology (S&T) and local and traditional knowledge, addresses not only production and productivity but the multifunctionality of agriculture, and recognizes that multiple perspectives exist on the role and nature of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology (AKST). For many years, agricultural science focused on delivering component technologies to increase farm-level productivity where the market and institutional arrangements put in place by the state were the primary drivers of the adoption of new technologies. The general model has been to continuously innovate, reduce farm gate prices and externalize costs. This model drove the phenomenal achievements of AKST in industrial countries after World War II and the spread of the Green Revolution beginning in the 1960s. But, given the new

challenges we confront today, there is increasing recognition within formal S&T organizations that the current AKST model requires revision. Business as usual is no longer an option. This leads to rethinking the role of AKST in achieving development and sustainability goals; one that seeks more intensive engagement across diverse worldviews and possibly contradictory approaches in ways that can inform and suggest strategies for actions enabling to the multiple functions of agriculture.”

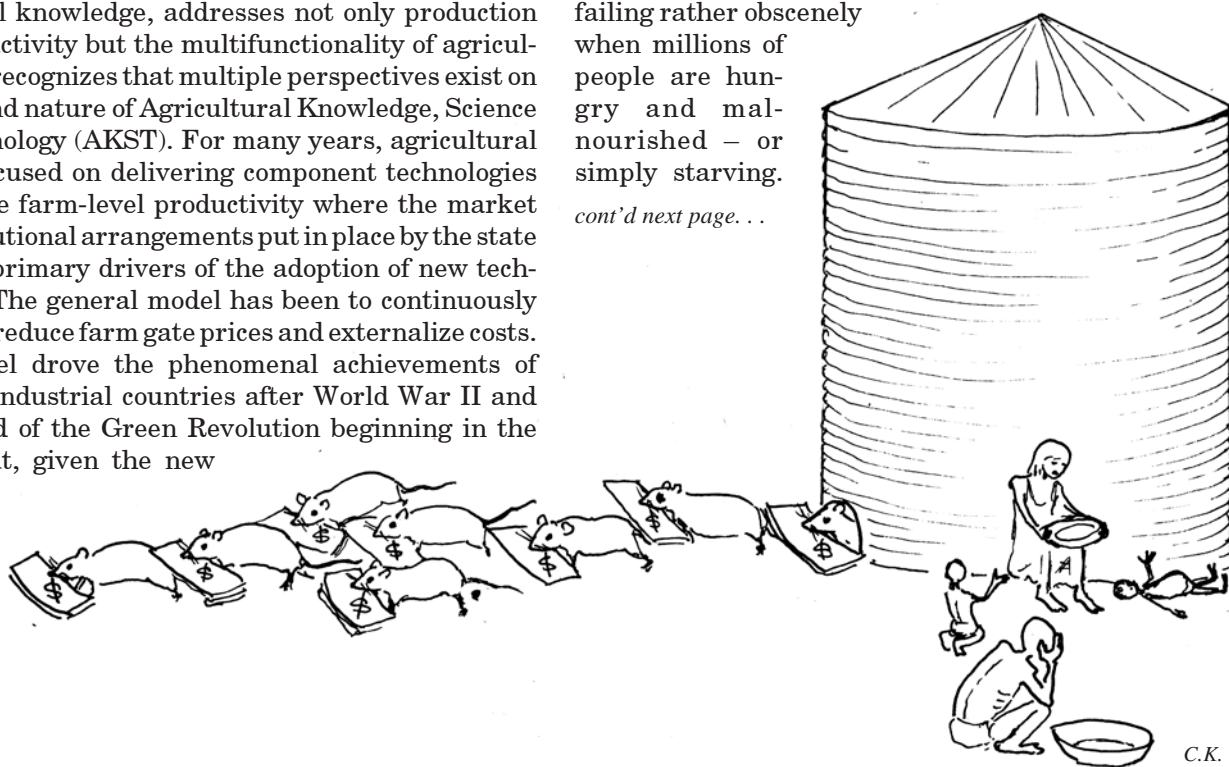
–www.agassessment.org/docs/SR_Exec_Sum_210408_Final.htm

Who really gets the ‘food aid’? (Follow the Money, part two)

Theoretically, ‘the Market’ is the mechanism that best balances out the supply-demand equation. According to this doctrine, when demand is greater than supply, supply will increase to meet the demand. When supply exceeds demand, it will shrink to the level of demand. Prices are the magic mechanism transmitting the necessary signals between suppliers and demanders (usually referred to as customers or consumers). Sometimes described as a ‘price discovery’ mechanism, the Market works according to some grand metaphysical design, not human caprice or greed, and humans are advised to defer to the ‘magic of the market’ when tempted to intervene to achieve some socially desirable outcome.

One obvious problem with this notion of supply and demand is that it seems to be failing rather obscenely when millions of people are hungry and malnourished – or simply starving.

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The demand for food is real and obvious, but so is the failure of the market to supply it. One might conclude that there is a serious fault in the magic.

Along with food prices, the price of potash, an essential ingredient in industrial food production, is soaring and along with it the wealth of the shareholders of the Potash Corporation of Saskatchewan. (See previous issue of *The Ram's Horn*.) One of these shareholders is the CEO of the corporation, whose personal wealth now includes \$7 million worth of PotashCorp stock, the result of a fourfold increase in the value of the stock over the past four years. He got the stock in the form of stock options at no cost as part of his 'compensation' since he was hired on as CEO nine years ago.

The granting of stock options – the is, rights to buy stock at a predetermined price – is supposed to provide incentives for the top execs to improve the value of the company. But again, the market fails, or, as stated in an article describing this situation, how should commodity companies pay executives “when corporate performance is linked to factors beyond their control?” It was not a heroic performance by CEO Doyle that lifted potash prices.

So here we have two extremes: the starving going without food because they are not in a position to express their demand in the commodity form of money, while the CEO gains a fortune in the same commodity form of money without any demand whatsoever (unless it could be greed). The only link between the two is potash, an inert commodity.

In this grossly distorted situation we now hear cries for help, not from the starving who have no voice in the market, but from public and charitable agencies which call for vast increases in food aid to meet the 'emergency.' The calls for food aid, of course, do not routinely question or threaten the structures of power that have created the inequity described above. The call for food aid is, rather, a call for the wealthy (relatively, if not absolutely) to share our surplus with the deprived – a rather different expression of the supply-demand 'equation.'

So where does food aid really go, then? Is it too much of a stretch to say that it goes to people like Mr Doyle, head of PotashCorp, and to corporations such as Cargill, ADM and Bunge that occupy the market space between farmers, with food commodities to sell, and the hungry, who may be the recipients of food aid?

Does all this mean that we should let Malthus' grim predictions rule, rather than make every effort to see that the hungry are fed? Of course not! but no sooner have I written 'fed' than I observe once again the perniciousness of our bad language. To say “the hungry are fed” implies that some external agency – be it the World Food Program or Cargill or Monsanto or the Canadian Food Grains Bank – is required to address the problem.

In the long term, the only real solution to the problem of hunger and starvation is food sovereignty and social justice. Those with enough must stop demanding more (including energy) and allow those without enough to feed themselves. The fact that 'we' have the money and consequently the market power does not mean that 'we' have to feed 'them,' though in the short term food aid is a morally essential first step in our release of the captives of 'our' market economy. It is the demands of that market economy which are responsible for commodity colonization of much of the world and the destruction of local, diversified subsistence agriculture. This means that supplying 'farm inputs' such as fertilizer and G.E. seeds is *not* food aid. Industrial seeds and fertilizer are simply the mechanisms of colonization and corporate control.

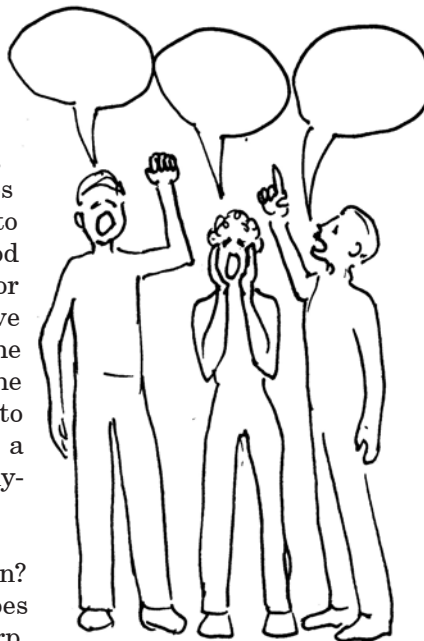
One of the proposals to address growing hunger is creation of a \$5 billion fund “that would enable countries to put forward action plans directed at getting critical inputs of fertilizer and seed to their impoverished small farmers. . . if we could help them get access, we could help them become commercial farmers. . .”

– G&M 30/4/08

Fertilizer companies have been riding burgeoning world agricultural markets and soaring prices to record profits and heady stock market gains. Agrium, for example, had a profit of \$195 million in the first quarter of this year.

Another farm and food system input is fossil fuel, and while hunger increases, so do oil company profits. Exxon Mobil has reported a first-quarter profit of \$10.9 billion.

– B.K.



VOICELESS

Who is to blame?

A month ago the London Observer commented;

“..... Across the world, a food crisis is now unfolding with frightening speed. Hundreds of millions of men and women who, only a few months ago, were able to provide food for their families, have found rocketing prices of wheat, rice and cooking oil have left them facing the imminent prospect of starvation. The spectre of catastrophe now looms over much of the planet.”

Robert Zoellick, the World Bank President and former U.S. Trade Representative, at the G7 meeting in mid-April, “warned that the world was now perched at the edge of catastrophe.” He apparently did not make reference to his role in bringing about this catastrophe, but clearly pointed the finger of blame at the USA when he said that everyone should “look closely at the effects of the dash for biofuels. I would hope that countries that, for whatever reason . . . have emphasized biofuel development will be particularly sensitive to the call to meet the emergency needs for people who may not have enough food to eat.”

– *The Observer, 13/4/08*

As US Trade Representative with the rank of ambassador from 2001 to 2005, Zoellick was aggressive and belligerent, playing a key role in the US-WTO complaint (backed by Canada) against the European Union over the EU’s refusal to allow the importation of GE foods, and hormone-beef. It was also Zoellick who fulminated against anyone who fought against the dumping of GE ‘food-aid’ in Africa, calling them murderers. He has long been a strong promoter of and negotiator for various free trade deals designed to destroy food self-sufficiency. After a spell with investment bank Goldman Sachs, George Bush nominated Zoellick to replace Paul Wolfowitz as President of the World Bank and he was appointed by the Bank’s executive board in June 2007.

nontarget.org

The Nature Institute, Ghent, New York, has a new website designed to make information about both the intended and unintended consequences of transgenic experiments available to the public in accessible form. The website, <http://nontarget.org>, is part of The Nature Institute’s ongoing project on “The Nontarget Effects of Genetic Manipulation.”

Nontarget effects have proven both extensive and unpredictable. The evidence for their occurrence, while mostly buried in the technical literature, is not disputable or even particularly controversial. It’s simply not

widely known. Once it is known, the frequently heard claim that genetic manipulation of organisms is a “precise science” without dramatic risks will either be voiced no more or will be recognized as dishonest.

Project director Craig Holdrege says, “if you manipulate one or more genes in an organism using the techniques of biotechnology, the so-called side-effects – which are not side-effects at all, but include direct responses by the organism to the invasive actions of the engineer – can occur anywhere and everywhere in the organism. They are not predictable, are little understood, and have mostly unknown consequences for health and the environment. The intended result may or may not be achieved in any given case, but the one almost sure thing is that unintended results – nontarget effects – will be achieved.”

Swiss ‘Dignity’ Law

The Swiss federal government’s ethics committee on non-human biotechnology has mapped out guidelines to help granting agencies decide which research applications deeply offend the dignity of plants – and hence become unfundable. The Gene Technology Law, which came into effect in 2004, stipulates that ‘the dignity of creatures’ should be considered in any research. The phrase has been widely criticized for its general woolliness, but it indisputably includes plants.

All plant biotechnology grant applications must now include a paragraph explaining the extent to which plant dignity is considered. But scientists don’t know what it means, says Beat Keller of the Institute of Plant Biology at the University of Zurich who is running the first field trial – of disease-resistant corn (maize) – to be approved under the new legislation.

“At the moment not even authorities who decide on grants know what the ‘dignity of plants’ really means,” says Markus Schefer, a constitution lawyer at the University of Basel and a member of the ethics committee. “That’s why we were asked to deliberate.”

The constitution says that the ‘dignity of creatures’ must be taken into account in the gene-technology arena, which is why the term has been adopted into the regulations. The government called on the advice of its ethics committee two years ago to help develop a definition for plants. The committee has created a decision tree presenting the different issues that need to be taken into account for each case. But it has come up with few concrete examples of what type of experiment might be considered an unacceptable insult to plant dignity. The committee does not consider that



genetic engineering of plants automatically falls into this category, but its majority view holds that it would if the genetic modification caused plants to 'lose their independence' – for example by interfering with their capacity to reproduce.

The statement has confused plant geneticists, who point out the contrast with traditional plant-hybridization technologies, for example in roses, which require male sterility, and the commercial development of seedless fruits. The definition of what constitutes dignity in animals is currently being tested in a Zurich court. Primate-research projects which involve separating young marmosets from their mothers have been put on hold while the court decides if they conflict with the animals' dignity. A ruling is expected this year.

– *Nature*, 23/4/08

Earnings and Inequity

The figures produced by Statistics Canada out of the 2006 census reveal a growing disparity in earnings, but they do not reveal the even more gross disparity between wealth and deprivation created by the investments held by the wealthy that yield capital gains and dividends – income which is not counted as 'earnings.'

The final 2006 census data reveal that the earnings of the average Canadian have stagnated over the last 25 years. In 2005, a person with a full-time job earned a median pre-tax salary of \$41,348 – only about a dollar a week more than what the average worker took home in 1980, adjusted for inflation. At the same time, those at the top end got a lot richer (16.4 per cent increase between 1980-2005) and those at the bottom got much poorer (20.6 per cent decline). Almost 3.5 million Canadians, or 11.4 per cent of the population, live below what Statistics Canada calls the low-income cut-off – a term others often refer to as the poverty line.

More than 600,000 Canadians earned \$100,000 or more in 2005 – a 25 per cent increase from the last census – while those earning \$150,000 or more rose one per cent, accounting for some 2.2 per cent of 'workers'.

The situation of immigrants has worsened as well. In 2005, immigrant men earned 63 cents for every dollar earned by a Canadian-born male worker. Twenty five years ago, the ratio was 85 cents. There was a more dramatic drop for immigrant women – from 85 cents to 56 cents in 2005.

The wage gender gap for the population as a whole was unchanged from the last census: women earned on average 85 cents for every dollar earned by a man.

Sweetness and Light Candy Makers Merge

Wrigley say its merger with Mars will result in "a powerful force for innovation and growth in the confectionery marketplace." Wrigley will become a separate, stand-alone subsidiary of Mars and Bill Wrigley will continue serving as the company's executive chairman. Mars remains a private company controlled by the Mars family.

While there is speculation that the rapid rise in commodity prices may have been a factor in the merger as companies seek to increase "efficiencies", and that this could mark the beginning of a merger rush in the food industry, one banker pointed out that one of the major roadblocks to food industry mergers is the number of companies that are family owned or family controlled and want to maintain their autonomy. "As we've seen with other family-owned companies, the logical thing to do and the expedient thing to do don't always win the day."

– *G&M*, 29/4/08

We could add that it's not a bad thing that there remain some people, even capitalists, with principle and that expediency and rationality don't always 'win the day.'



Wind Power

"Spain generated more than 40% of its electricity from wind capacity on a windy Saturday recently. The week-day record is 28% – enough to power Madrid, Barcelona, Seville, Valencia, Toledo, Cordoba, Granada, Santander, Bilbao, and Zaragoza combined. So high concentrations of wind power can be accommodated within an electricity grid, apparently, despite what the nay-sayers would have you believe."

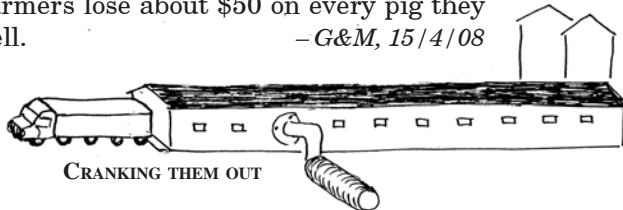
– *Oil Depletion Analysis Centre Newsletter*, 11/4/08

Another burst balloon

"Ottawa to pay farmers \$50 million to slaughter hogs."

The Canadian government plans to pay hog farmers up to \$50 million in total to slaughter as many as 150,000 breeding sows. Farmers are to receive \$225 for every hog they kill (about four times what a farmer would receive for a cull sow), so long as they agree to destroy their entire breeding herd and stay out of the hog business for three years. The government hopes the program will reduce a glut on the market that has driven down prices to the point where farmers lose about \$50 on every pig they sell.

– G&M, 15/4/08



One of the largest hog factories in Saskatchewan was Stomp Pork Farms – now bankrupt – which has been producing half a million market pigs annually in 11 barns. It is limited to receiving \$3 million under the slaughter program, or \$6 per animal. If there was no cap on the program, Stomp could receive around \$15 million.

The biggest hog factory in Saskatchewan is Big Sky, founded and run by Florian Posberg, which cranks out 1.2 million piglets a year. The province actually owns 62.9% of the company. Now the province has approved a loan to Big Sky of \$3.7 million to keep it afloat, or as they say, to protect its investment, which the province valued at \$30 million at the end of 2007, \$15 million less than a year earlier.

Maybe it is now reasonable to hope for the end of these huge pig factories.

European Update

Greece has renewed its three-year-old ban on Monsanto's genetically modified maize (MON810) for two more years and expanded it to include 70 types of seed. Greece has some 27,000 beekeepers and accounts for an estimated 16 percent of European Union honey production. Experts fear pollen from biotech crops, carried by bees, could adversely affect swarms. "We absolutely oppose the circulation of genetically modified organisms," said Agriculture Minister Alexandros Kondosa, "because of the potential threat to human health and to the beekeeping industry."

– *International Herald Tribune, 23/4/08*

On May 7th the European Commission, the EU's executive arm, delayed a decision on whether farmers may grow more genetically modified crops, saying further scientific analysis was needed before approval could be given. The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) will be asked for more assessment of the risk of growing two GM maize crops and a potato modified to produce extra starch. That move is likely to put off EU approval of the crops for several months. EU Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas had wanted to reject the two maize applications, pitting himself against many Commission colleagues more favorable towards biotechnology. He has also delayed deciding on the potato for nearly a year. The EU has not approved any GM crops for growing since 1998.

In return for sending the three applications back to the scientists, Dimas will sign an order for Austria to lift its ban on import and processing of two GM maizes – although cultivation will continue to be prohibited. Austria is the only remaining EU country cited in a WTO case filed against the Commission by Argentina, Canada and the United States where national bans on specific GMO products are still in effect.

The Commission also instructed its services to find a technical solution for the issue of low-level presence of non-approved GMOs in food and feedstuffs as quickly as possible and at the latest before the summer.

– *Reuters, 7/5/08*

GM Crop Promiscuity, Longevity

A University of Arkansas researcher and her colleagues have won a government grant to look at the combined effects of global climate change on weed biology, focusing in particular on transgenic hybrid weeds created by cross-pollination with genetically modified crop plants.

Cindy L. Sagers and colleagues will study gene flow from canola plants that have been genetically modified to be herbicide and pesticide resistant. "Canola will hybridize with about 40 species, and one of those is a particularly bad weed pest," Sagers said. Thus the crop plant has the potential to create 'superweeds' that spread and resist efforts to get rid of them.

While working at the Environmental Protection Agency office in Corvallis, Ore., Sagers learned how to hand-pollinate canola and its cousin mustards, so that the researchers can study hybrids in a laboratory setting. The researchers also began examining the problem from a geospatial context, contacting extension agents in the northern Midwest, consulting online flora and herbaria, mining plant databases and funneling all



of that information into a map of the distribution of weeds that are sexually compatible with canola. "I learned the value of a multidisciplinary approach to solving a well-defined problem," Sagers said. "There were geographers, geneticists and ecologists working on the same project." This research laid the ground work for the current project.

With the distribution maps, they will be able to build predictive models that will show what could happen with global climate change. They will be able to show how temperature changes might affect flowering and cross-pollination with related plants and weeds. In 2009 and 2010, they will be able to track the gene flow and gene flow rates of genetic modifications. They seek patterns in population biology that might make the plants more or less likely to hybridize and create 'super weeds'.

– University of Arkansas, 24/4/08

Another team of scientists, including University of California Riverside's Norman Ellstrand, proposes that making maps of biotech crops on a county and township level of the entire United States available to scientists will permit much-needed studies of their environmental impacts. "If we had geographic information regarding where biotech crops are grown, we could test a lot of the claims about their impacts – both positive and negative," Ellstrand said. "To evaluate the benefits and other impacts of such crops, we need to

localize their distribution on a geographic scale much smaller than the acreage in a state. But to prevent harassment of those who grow these crops, the scale cannot be as fine as an individual farm."

– Science, 25/4/08

The seeds of some genetically modified crops appear to remain in the earth for at least a decade. Researchers at Sweden's Lund University and the Danish Technical University have found transgenic plants growing in a field planted with GM rapeseed more than 10 years ago. Although measures were taken in the years following the GM trial to remove 'volunteers', 15 out of 38 sample seedlings tested positive for the genetically modified trait of herbicide tolerance 10 years after the trial had ended. Their findings are in contrast to previous studies.

"In general, studies suggest that the majority of seeds disappear from the seedbank within two years," they write. "This finding of volunteers, despite labour intensive control for 10 years, supports previous suggestions that volunteer oilseed rape needs to be carefully managed in order for non-GM crops to be planted after GM crops. . . I think for oilseed rape we may have to be aware that there will always be some contamination and therefore we may need labeling to tell the consumer," said lead researcher Tina D'Hertefeldt.

– Biology Letters, 23/1/08



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