Public Comments of Mark Darrington

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My name is Mark Darrington, I grow malt barley, potatoes, sugarbeets and wheat in Declo, Idaho. I am an immediate past board member of US Wheat Associates and the former chairman of the National Association of Wheat Growers-US Wheat Associates Joint Biotech Committee. The policies for these national organizations support science-based regulations and I believe the AC-21 work should also be based on science.

In the area where I farm, it is common for individual farms to grow multiple crops at one time. I primarily deliver directly into food channels and my customers have very tight specifications for quality, cleanliness, pesticide residues, mycotoxins, and other attributes. I understand what it is like to have a load rejected by a food processor and redirected to feed because it does not meet a rigid standard that goes beyond what is required by USDA regulations. I make the choice to accept the financial risks associated with growing these crops to a strict standard and I manage my business to accommodate those risks.

For example, barley maltsters have very narrow specifications for acceptable quality for barley. In some years, I am not able to meet a particular specification for reasons that are mostly beyond my control. I have had to take a loss and deliver into the feed market and I am not compensated for the price differential between malting and feed barley. In some classes, wheat farmers are compensated not only on yield and quality but on protein as well. It can be highly variable from year-to-year. Purchasing insurance on some of those quality parameters is something that I can do to reduce my exposure to risk, and every year I weigh the cost of the insurance versus the potential benefit**.**

Not every crop is suitable for every environment or every growing area. Barley and wheat are more susceptible to adverse effects from weather and plant diseases than corn and soybeans because they are grown in harsher environments and there has been less investment in innovation and technology in new varieties than in corn and soybeans. I would argue that there are many risks in farming that are economically more significant than the presence of biotech in a non-GM shipment due to outcrossing. Outcrossing is highly crop specific and some crops like wheat experience little gene flow beyond a few feet which has been documented in various academic studies. It is not equitable to propose a federally mandated compensation mechanism for a small subset of organic producers without significant proof that they have had substantial economic harm.

Coexistence practices are routine and familiar to growers and these good management practices are based on prevention and good communication with neighbors. Seed growers have successfully managed purity issues for years by developing localized systems and solutions. Coexistence practices are based on preventative controls. Testing is actually the most costly and least effective method to prevent problems within the food supply. If AC21 encourages more testing and a compensation mechanism, you could be discouraging science-based management practices that would be much more effective at preventing outcrossing from occurring. You may even be creating an incentive for poor management practices.

 I firmly believe that coexistence is an issue to be settled by neighbors. My shop and storage facilities adjoin a storage facility owned by a neighbor. He stores organic and conventionally produced wheat in bins serviced by the same handling equipment. The organic wheat contains enough weed seeds that he runs it through a cleaner prior to shipping. The concern for me arose when the weed seed and chaff were left unattended and allowed to blow across my land. After a short visit we solved the problem of weed seed disposal as neighbors working together. A friend of mine grows non-biotech sweet corn. His contract with his processor requires that he have a one quarter mile buffer from biotech corn which he is able to achieve by talking with his neighbor and planting his crops accordingly. As growers it is our own responsibility to meet our obligations, and the associated benefits and costs, of meeting contractual specifications.

In the past five years, I have twice researched opportunities to grow organic potatoes. Qualifying land and compost were available. Even with available inputs at my disposal, the risk still did not justify the potential reward. That was my choice. If your group develops a compensation mechanism, it cannot be used to offset the costs associated with maintaining a premium product. The current organic premiums, determined by market forces, are already compensating organic producers and the supply chain for their efforts to maintain their product.

The recommendations of AC21 must not provide compensation for private contractual arrangements. Particularly if those contracts treat the presence of safe, approved biotech enhanced grains in the parts per million as contamination on par with a violation of Federal regulations like illegal pesticide residue. All of the crops grown in this country have been deemed safe for growing and for food and feed under the regulations administered by USDA, FDA and EPA. As AC-21 members, you are discussing compensation for private contract risk not health and safety risks.

To conclude, I want to tell you about my local french fry plant. One of their largest foreign material problems is golf balls that appear in delivered loads of potatoes. That’s right, golf balls. Should we be considering taxing all golf ball sales, or all golf courses or all golfers to offset the expense of cleaning golf balls from the potato manufacturing process? No. There is no question that it is a problem, but it is a problem that is a cost of doing business that can be and should be managed by the parties involved.

Thank you for your time today and for the opportunity to provide a viewpoint from a crop that does not have biotech varieties available, but sees the potential benefits of new technology. In order for new technologies to be introduced into more crops we will need regulations that are based on sound science so that producers will continue to have a choice in what they grow.