

Farmers hold the key to survival in uncertain times

Family farmers around the world hold the key to the survival of the planet, says Pat Mooney, Executive-Director of the ETC Group and a respected analyst of the global food system.

Speaking at the National Farmers Union 40th annual convention in Ottawa in late November, Mooney said while there is no shortage of bad news for family farmers in Canada and around the world, there is also reason for optimism. Family farmers, he said, are working to preserve the genetic diversity of plants and animals that will be so crucial to surviving the effects of climate change.

Mooney said it is projected that many countries will experience a 50% decline in yield of their major food crops in only ten years. Only crops and animals that have sufficient genetic diversity will be able to withstand that environmental shock, he added.

Mooney recalled that the first time he spoke at an NFU convention, in 1978, he warned of the dangers of Plant Breeders Rights legislation, which would give chemical companies intellectual property rights over seed varieties, forcing farmers to pay royalties to the companies. “We had a problem and industry had an opportunity” at that time, he said. “The problem we had was world hunger – 500 million people were starving around the globe while farmers were going broke because they were not getting fair prices for their products.”

Industry, meanwhile, had an opportunity to consolidate the marketplace and “centralize the profit centres,” he stated. “In the 1970s, there were 7,000 different seed enterprises selling seeds to farmers, and 65 different pesticide companies.” The big corporate players convinced governments to grant patent protection on plant species, livestock breeds, and fish species; and it did not take long before the largest companies dominated the market. “Now, instead of 7,000 seed companies, we have 10 companies that control 67% of the global seed market. But in fact, just 3 seed companies control over 50% of the market.”

And where there used to be 65 pesticide companies, there are now only 6 that account for “virtually 90% of the global pesticide market.” Mooney said the top three companies in each sector “are the same companies.” While these corporations always promote new technologies with the promise that they will feed the hungry, the end result is that the situation always gets worse. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the promise was biotechnology, now the promise is synthetic biology. “But now, instead of 500 million hungry people, we have a billion hungry people around the world, and a billion more who are malnourished beyond that, and another billion who are also being destroyed by the food system because they’re overweight or obese.”

Mooney said there are parallels between the situation in the 1970s and now. While corporations have gained patent protection on fully “one-quarter of the world’s biomass”, they are looking to cement their monopoly by ‘commodifying’ the remaining three-quarters of plant and animal DNA. The research on plant livestock breeding being done by these companies is aimed at satisfying the legal requirements of the patent office, “which means that they are breeding for uniformity – the exact opposite of what we’re going to need to survive,” said Mooney. “Diversity is needed, not uniformity, so we’re actually going down a path which is disastrous for

the food system. If we're going to get through the crisis ahead of us, we're going to need the farmers. We're going to need that diversity. There is no other way, The companies can't do it. They will not succeed."

Mooney said the other important point that is a source of hope for the future is the fact that farmers today are more organized than ever, and they are working together nationally and internationally toward a common goal.