

Front Page Story

Local film on GM food a hot ticket

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By Helen Fallding

A video on genetically modified crops that has created a storm of controversy at the University of Manitoba will finally be shown across Canada next month after three years of wrangling over its release.

Environmental studies professor Stéphane McLachlan and his graduate student Ian Mauro plan to launch *Seeds of Change* Nov. 18 in Ottawa at the National Farmers Union annual convention.

The documentary on farmers' experiences with genetically modified crops is scheduled to be shown Nov. 30 at the Winnipeg Art Gallery. It will also be featured at a series of fundraising events for farmers in B.C. and shown at Concordia University in Montreal.

Deadlocked negotiations over the video's release were resolved following a *Free Press* story last month in which the researchers accused the university of blocking them from distributing results of their publicly funded research.

In a letter to the researchers last week, university vice-president Joanne Keselman said they have permission to use research video footage in the documentary as long as it includes a statement that the opinions expressed are not those of the university.

The administration is also asking to see copies of consent forms from the people interviewed, which the researchers plan to deliver today.

At a heated panel discussion on academic freedom yesterday at the University Centre, Mauro was cheered by many in the crowd of about 150 as he attributed the university's change of heart to public pressure.

"If the university had given us these conditions three years ago, we wouldn't be here today," he said.

The university has dropped demands that the researchers cover the university's legal fees if anyone sues over the video -- such as biotech companies like Monsanto.

Monsanto staff have never seen the film or threatened to sue, according to a spokeswoman.

At yesterday's panel discussion, Keselman said the lengthy negotiations over Mauro's video had nothing to do with its contents, academic freedom or Monsanto's leasing of office space in the university's Smartpark.

She said the negotiations were originally complicated by the involvement of a private investor, who later pulled out. When the researchers planned to release the documentary through movie theatres, the university needed to protect its commercial interests, she said.

The documentary will probably generate less controversy now than if it had been released three years ago, when Monsanto was still promoting genetically modified wheat and fighting in court with Saskatchewan farmer Percy Schmeiser. The Canadian Association of University Teachers, which has backed Mauro and McLachlan in their Free the Film campaign, will fly researcher Nancy Olivieri to Winnipeg as a speaker for the documentary's local launch.

She had a public fight with the University of Toronto when drug company Apotex -- which was negotiating a huge donation to the university -- tried to prevent her from going public with her concerns about one of their drugs.

Mauro said *Seeds of Change* will soon be posted on a website not connected with the university. DVD copies will be available on a cost-recovery basis.

Plans are also in the works for the documentary to be shown across the U.S.

Mauro said he has received requests for the video from Japan, New Zealand and Australia since a Canadian Press version of the *Free Press* story was posted on websites and distributed by e-mail around the world.

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