

Academic freedom called into question at the U of M

Research film on GM crops sparks controversy

By Dave Brophy, Gradzette editor

At a panel hosted by the Graduate Students Association on October 25 called, "Are Corporate Interests Jeopardizing Academic Freedoms?" representatives of the University administration clashed with faculty and students. At the centre of the debate was the controversial film-documentary *Seeds of Change*, which examines the risks associated with biotechnology in agriculture.

Seeds of Change was made as part of a publicly funded research program at U of M that would give voice to a previously excluded perspective in the debate on the use of genetically modified (GM) crops in the prairies—that of farmers. University of Manitoba (U of M) PhD candidate Ian Mauro, U of M Professor of Environment and Geography Dr. Stéphane McLachlan, and local independent filmmaker Jim Sanders completed the film collaboratively in the fall of 2002. However, *Seeds of Change* has still not been publicly released.

"My thesis advisor and I have been involved in a three-year-long battle with the U of M to have our publicly funded research released," Mauro said in opening up the panel discussion, which also featured McLachlan, U of M Professor of Economics Dr. Robert Chernomas, Vice President Research Dr. Joanne Keselman, and Smart Park President Dr. Alan Simms.

After prolonged negotiations with the University administration over conditions for releasing *Seeds of Change*, Mauro, McLachlan and Sanders, following expert legal advice, broke off talks with the University in frustration in June of this year, deciding to begin a public campaign to expose what they had concluded was a deliberate strategy of suppression by the University administration.

"I welcome the opportunity to make this public, and to bring media and student attention to what has been a very difficult three years," said McLachlan.

The story of alleged suppression of the video by the U of M administration was broken in the mainstream news by Helen Fallding in the Winnipeg Free Press. According to Mauro, public scrutiny and criticism following the Free Press story forced the U of M administration to finally abandon stalling tactics that have held up the release of *Seeds of Change*.

"Due to the public pressure, the media exposure, the CAUT [Canadian Association of University Teachers] backing us and launching a campaign across the country to stop this egregious behaviour that the U of M has taken against its researchers and its students, the U of M has capitulated," stated Mauro.

Mauro declared victory, which prompted applause and hooting from the panel audience, on the basis that after the Fallding story in the Free Press, he and McLachlan received a letter from the University administration stating they had dropped a number of conditions that had previously made it impossible for the researcher-filmmakers to go ahead and publicly launch *Seeds of Change*. With the administration now asking only for proof of permission from people appearing in the film to use footage of them, and for a disclaimer that the opinions expressed in the video are not those of the University, Mauro said, "We're happy to do that. If the University had given us these conditions three years ago, we wouldn't be here today and our video would have been released to the public."

Addressing the allegations of suppression of *Seeds of Change*, Vice President Research Keselman stated, "This is simply not true...The video in question was developed independently of the University by Dr. McLachlan and Mr. Mauro, and others, by their own admission with funds provided to them independently of the University. The connection to the University is that this video contains, among other things, raw video footage captured as a result of a University research project that received funding from one of the national granting agencies...Staff members that wish to use [video] recordings must secure permission of their Dean or Department head. To date, approval to use the raw video footage from the Dean or Department head has never been sought by Dr. McLachlan or Mr. Mauro, so permission to use this raw video footage could not possibly have been denied."

Taking the audience through a prepared "Point-Counterpoint" brochure concerning the divergent accounts of the negotiations over release of *Seeds of Change* that had thus far been expressed in the media, by the administration on the one side and the researcher-filmmakers on the other, McLachlan addressed Keselman's charge that permission had not been sought to use the video footage: "This is completely untrue...In fact, in three years, and 66 pages of emails that I have, I usually ended any correspondence by just desperately pleading that the University find some way to release the video. That was all we cared about."

"There's no doubt in my mind," McLachlan said, "that if the video had been pro-industry, it would have been released three years ago. And there's no doubt in my mind that if we were still negotiating with the University we still wouldn't be releasing the video and we wouldn't have received permission from the University to release it."

It is important to note that the documentary, in providing a balanced account—both the good and the bad—of the use of GM crops, is explicitly critical of agricultural bio-technology and of Monsanto Inc. in particular. Monsanto is a multinational corporation that dominates the global market in GM crops, as well as being famous as the world's largest producer of PCBs, including the chemical warfare product Agent Orange that the company provided to the US state during the Vietnam War. Equally important to note is that Monsanto is a company that has a long and intimate relationship with the University of Manitoba—once on campus and now in the university's industrial "Smart Park".

Keselman disagreed with the suggestion that the University administration was pro-industry. "I think the University is community friendly. And we're prepared to engage in proper business relationships with all kinds of people in our external community... Of the \$91.1 Million we brought in last year in research funding, less than 3% of that came from industry. So I don't believe that this University is any more corporation-friendly than others."

Although, the suppression of the film was the focus of discussion during the panel, the larger question of academic freedom was touched on. "This fundamental principle [of academic freedom] is enshrined in the Board of Governors By-law 23, which is called Academic Freedoms and Responsibilities," Keselman said. By way of example, Keselman suggested that formal protocols such as By-law 23 ensure that academic freedom is upheld: "In the late 1990s, I personally addressed a question concerning the administration's protocol for negotiation of third-party research contracts that was raised by the senate. I answered this question by detailing the principles that guide the University in negotiating all research contracts... Every research contract that is presented to the University is reviewed against these principles and the University will not enter into any research contracts with third parties that do not uphold these principles."

Economics Professor Chernomas acknowledged the importance of having the explicit guidelines to which Keselman referred, but expressed concern that members of the administration are left to apply these guidelines without being held accountable by students and faculty, because the latter are not involved in negotiating third-party research contracts or reviewing those negotiations. Chernomas stated, "In the interest of transparency, I'm wondering if the administration would allow senate or a sub-committee of senate to review the private [research] contracts, so that we could be assured that some academics and students were involved directly in vetting those contracts. And if not, why not?"

Taking Chernomas's question a step further, McLachlan called for an independent inquiry into the negotiations and surrounding circumstances that have stalled the release of *Seeds of Change*. UMSU Council has already passed a motion calling for the same.

In the meantime, Mauro, McLachlan and Sanders prepare for the long-awaited public launch of their film, which is scheduled for Nov. 18 in Ottawa at the National Farmers Union (NFU) Annual Convention.

The NFU is interested in the film because a large majority of farmers make use of GM crops in Canada, and their experiences with them—both good and bad—continue to be effectively ignored by policy makers. In addition to the Canadian Association of University Teachers, NFU has supported Mauro, McLachlan and Sanders in their fight because they feel that by actively preventing the release of *Seeds of Change*, the administration at the U of M has furthered the marginalisation of farmers' perspectives in the GM crops debate.