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Genetically modified foods potential threat to small farms

PORTAGE PARK DISTRICT FOUNDATION

Genetically modified foods have recently made headlines in the growing national food movement. Last fall, California's Proposition 37 would have required labels for a majority of foods containing genetically modified organisms (GMOs). The proposition was not passed, but it started a national conversation.

At our small-scale farm in Ravenna Township, local customers started asking all the right questions: Is your farm organic? Are your products non-GMO? Do your chickens really live in a school bus?

In simple terms, GMOs are patented seeds that are engineered to resist weeds and pests. For example, Monsanto's Roundup Ready soybean and corn seeds contain an in-plant tolerance to Roundup agricultural herbicides. The plant is literally spraying itself for weeds.

Some would argue that this could be harmful to the environment and our health since the toxins in these seeds are not regulated by the EPA and the FDA, but GMOs were created in an attempt to sustain the growing industrial farms that produce cheap food demanded by many of us. One farmer can more easily manage hundreds of acres at a lower cost, but there may be a greater financial impact on our environment and public health in the future.

The USDA's National Organic Program requires certified organic farms to plant certified organic seeds that are non-GMO. The program also requires a system plan for farms that include natural and man-made barriers against the float of GMOs from nearby conventional farms.

For our operation, GMOs have truly become a trespassing and property rights issue that could potentially threaten our small business. If the conventional corn field down the road cross pollinates with our organic corn field on a windy day, the USDA regulation says we are in violation of the organic standards and Monsanto could pros-

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Amy Gignac



ecute for patent infringement. Imagine this — your neighbor's rescue dog sneaks over to your property, breeds your "Best In Show" dog, you end up with a litter of mutts that you can't sell at a premium — and then your neighbor sues you? GMOs clearly have political, environmental, health and financial impacts on our food system, and the debate will continue. As consumers, we have a right to know what's in the food we eat and have a right to know how it's produced. At this point, the certified organic label is the only label that will confirm you are not getting GMO when buying at your local grocery store.

While this certification gives credibility, I would also encourage you to support the growing local food economy in Portage County and buy from your neighbors, farm stands, and local farmers' markets.

Local Harvest (www.localharvest.org) and the USDA's campaign "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food" are excellent resources for finding specific products and programs. Ask your farmer about non-GMO seed sources, chemical fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, and animal husbandry. Most will be happy to answer any question you have.... and, yes, we retrofitted a used school bus into the Free Range Rover (mobile chicken coop) that houses 60 laying hens and one protective rooster named Luther!

Amy Gignac left her corporate career in 2011 to improve her health, unleash her entrepreneurial spirit, and feed the community good food. She and Tim Fox own and operate Breakneck Acres, a certified organic farm in Ravenna Township. Green Portage is a monthly feature of the Record-Courier in cooperation with the Portage Park District Foundation.