

Western Organization of Resource Councils  
2401 Montana Avenue, #301  
Billings, Montana 59101  
406.252.9672 • [billings@worc.org](mailto:billings@worc.org)

## **Farmers, Ranchers and Consumers Challenge GM Alfalfa Lawsuit Says USDA Failed to Address Public Health, Environmental and Economic Risks in Approving Commercial Release**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Thursday, February 16, 2006

**Billings, Mont.** - The Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC) has joined a lawsuit filed in federal court today challenging the federal government's approval of the commercial release of genetically modified (GM) alfalfa.

The suit calls the U.S. Department of Agriculture's decision to release the alfalfa, genetically modified by Monsanto to resist Roundup herbicide, a threat to the livelihoods of farmers and a risk to the environment.

"The department did not face up to the public health, environmental, and economic consequences of the release of genetically modified Roundup Ready alfalfa," said Dean Hulse, WORC spokesperson from Fargo, N.D. "What concerns me about the questionable release of yet-another genetically modified crop – this time, Roundup Ready alfalfa – is its potential to limit my choice as a consumer. Genetically modified alfalfa threatens organic farmers through its ability to contaminate their fields and pastures. When organic farmers are put in jeopardy, so is my supply of organic grain, meat and dairy products. Taking away my choice as a consumer is a form of disenfranchisement."

The suit contends release of GM alfalfa would ultimately prevent farmers from growing conventional and organic varieties and endanger export markets.

"As a producer of organic alfalfa seed and hay, there will be absolutely no way I will be able to protect my crop from contamination," said Blaine Schmaltz, a Rugby, N.D., farmer and member of the Dakota Resource Council. "I market my organic seed and hay to organic dairies and livestock growers. Currently I do not test my alfalfa, but with the introduction of genetically modified alfalfa, these products will have to be tested at both ends, adding barriers and expense.

"I also export seeds for organic sprouting, under strict, no-genetic modifying regulations. That business may cease," Schmaltz said.

The suit also says the release would likely increase use of pesticides and add to the growing problem of weeds resistant to glyphosate, the active ingredient in Monsanto's Roundup herbicide.

Over 80 percent of U.S. alfalfa is now grown without use of herbicides, and experts say Roundup Ready alfalfa could lead to more herbicide use on alfalfa and more chemicals released into the environment. A report by Dr. Charles Benbrook found that farmers growing GM soy beans use two to five times more herbicides than conventional soybean farmers.

Recent reports have linked the increased use of Roundup Ready crops with the spread of weeds resistant to glyphosate. This resistance had led to more use of herbicides and forced farmers to use more toxic herbicides. The suit contends USDA did not address the potential impacts of the increased use of Roundup in alfalfa and did not address issues related to wild relatives of alfalfa.

The lawsuit filed in federal court in the Northern District of California calls on the court to rescind the deregulated status of Monsanto's Roundup Ready alfalfa, and says USDA's decision to approve the crop was "arbitrary and capricious". The lawsuit challenges USDA for its inadequate review of the crop and calls for a full environmental impact statement.

"We believe a more thorough review is necessary because even the USDA's own inspector general has questioned the department's oversight of genetically modified crops," Hulse said. "We want USDA to conduct a full environmental impact statement on the release of genetically modified alfalfa and examine the costs to public health, the environment, and the economy."

The USDA inspector general released a report in December finding that "Current [USDA] regulations, policies and procedures do not go far enough to ensure the safe introduction of agricultural biotechnology."

The Center for Food Safety filed the lawsuit on behalf of itself, WORC, Dakota Resource Council, the National Family Farm Coalition, Cornucopia Institute, Sierra Club, Beyond Pesticides, and two individual alfalfa seed producers.

U.S. producers grow alfalfa on more than 21 million acres. The crop is worth \$8 billion annually, not counting the value of final products such as dairy goods. Alfalfa is the third most valuable and fourth most widely grown crop in this country. Japan buys about 75 percent of the \$480 million worth of alfalfa exported annually.

Alfalfa hay production is a \$1.7 billion a year industry in the states of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho, Oregon and North and South Dakota, which account for one-quarter of U.S. annual alfalfa hay production.

Alfalfa is used primarily in feed for dairy cows and beef cattle, and also contributes to pork, lamb, sheep and honey production. Nearly seven percent of alfalfa seed produced in the U.S. is eaten by consumers as sprouts in salads and other foods.

USDA approved the release of GM alfalfa, the first commercial release of a perennial crop, on June 27, 2005.

WORC is a network representing farmers, ranchers, and consumers in Colorado, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, and Wyoming. The Dakota Resource Council is a member of WORC.