Oregon to Allow Canola in Willamette Valley

JONATHAN J. COOPER,Associated Press

SALEM, Ore. (AP) — Oregon will allow canola to be grown in the Willamette Valley for the first time despite objections from organic seed farmers concerned that canola production will harm their delicate crops.

The state Department of Agriculture issued a rule Thursday allowing up to 2,500 acres of the yellow-flowering canola, which can be pressed to extract oil for food or fuel. The agency's decision attempts to bridge a bitter divide between the interests of renewable fuel and organic foods in a state that cherishes both.

Canola is in the same plant family as vegetables like broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower and Brussels sprouts. Farmers who grow seeds for those vegetables fear genetically modified canola pollen will contaminate their organic product and bring new pests and diseases.

Farmers interested in growing canola have until July 15 each year to apply for a permit for fall planting.

Agriculture officials say canola will still be excluded from areas with the most intense concentrations of vegetable-seed fields. The rules include restrictions designed to prevent conflicts between canola fields and seed farms.

"I think it is a good compromise considering we've been at zero acres of canola," said Kathy Hadley, a Rickreall farmer who would like to grow canola on some of her fields. "It feels like progress at least."

The conflict may not be over. State lawmakers have introduced separate bills in the House and Senate that would make it illegal to grow canola, undermining the Agriculture Department's rule. Neither bill has had a public hearing scheduled, the first step of legislative action, and it's not clear whether they'll go anywhere.

George Kimbrell, a lawyer for the Center for Food Safety who led a successful lawsuit to block an earlier version of the rule, said he hasn't had time to review the state's final decision.

"We're going to be reviewing the rule to ensure that it protects the farmers in the valley and that it complies with the law," Kimbrell said.

The adopted rules are more restrictive than two earlier proposals, but seed farmers fear the 2,500-acre cap will eventually be raised.

Seed farmers describe the expansion of canola as a Pandora's Box that, once opened, will destroy their industry. Wind can carry pollen for miles, and seed farmers worry that genetically modified canola plants will pollinate with organic

brassicas, producing seeds with no value.

They also worry about cabbage maggots and white mold, a fungus that can destroy root vegetable crops.

Canola proponents argue that with the right controls, the plant can co-exist without harming other brassicas. Some wheat and grass seed farmers are eager to use canola as a rotational crop to interrupt disease and pest cycles. They used to burn their fields at the end of the season, but recent pollution controls have limited that option.

Source URL (retrieved on *07/23/2014 - 12:00am*):
http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/news/2013/02/oregon-allow-canola-willamette-valley