

**WHAT ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS TO IMPLEMENT COEXISTENCE  
BETWEEN GE AND NON-GE ALFALFA?**

**By Chep Gauntt<sup>1</sup>**

**SPEAKER BACKGROUND**

Chep is a third generation farmer. He was raised on a hay and cattle ranch in Moses Lake, WA. He earned a Bachelor's degree in Business finance from Eastern WA State University. Currently he farms alfalfa, timothy hay, field corn, wheat and sweet corn in SE Washington with his son, Drex Gauntt. They also manage the drip irrigation system on a tree plantation for Boise Cascade. Chep is past President of the WA State Hay Growers Association and past board member of the National Alfalfa & Forage Alliance.

**HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE COEXISTENCE?**

Coexistence is the ability and the right for each farmer to plant and harvest the crop of his or her choice (GE or non GE). However, in exercising that right there cannot be any danger of infringing or trespassing on a different farmer's choice or methods. Respect others choices.

**IS COEXISTENCE POSSIBLE?**

Each farm and farmer chooses the crops, varieties, timing, method of harvest and markets. Coexistence is only possible if mutual respect is given and all parties make an effort.

**WHAT ARE THE KEY POLICIES OR MECHANISMS NECESSARY TO IMPLEMENT  
COEXISTENCE BETWEEN GE AND NON-GE CROPS?**

An effort must be made beginning with seed companies (genetic suppliers), seed salesmen and individual farms to be completely open and honest about crops and cropping plans. If an individual has a question about a neighbors' cropping plan then open communication should exist.

**WILL THE INTRODUCTION OF ROUNDUP-READY ALFALFA INEVITABLY  
RESULT IN THE DESTRUCTION OF ORGANIC, EXPORT OR OTHER GE-  
SENSITIVE ALFALFA PRODUCTION?**

I don't know about the long term future of specific markets. At this time (November 2011) the two major export buyers in Washington state have written in the purchase contract that there will not be any detectable GE alfalfa. The major market for those two is Japan. It is unknown if they

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will accept GE alfalfa in the years to come or if they would import from some one other that the United States if all US alfalfa becomes GE.

**IT IS LIKELY THAT COEXISTENCE WOULD MEAN THAT SOME GROWERS (BOTH GE-ADAPTING AND NON-GE) WILL HAVE TO ADJUST METHODS OR SACRIFICE CHOICES IN ORDER TO ACCOMPLISH THE BROADER FOAL OF COEXISTENCE. HOW SHOULD THAT BE DECIDED?**

Obviously for coexistence neighboring farms and even custom operators will need to be aware and sensitive to the different market choices. The decision is to adjust methods or variety (crop) choices will still be individual.

**IS ZERO CONTAMINATION OF ALFALFA HAY OR SEED POSSIBLE? HOW SHOULD ACCEPTABLE THRESHOLDS FOR CONTAMINATION (WHETHER ZERO OR LOW LEVEL PRESENCE) OF GE-SENSITIVE HAY PRODUCTION BE DECIDED?**

I don't know if it is possible to have zero GE alfalfa. I think efforts to have specific zones of seed production is important. I think the threshold numbers for GE sensitive hay should be an exact number (e.g. 3%?). This number should be a USDA standard for the United States. With an exact published standard all producers would be cognizant of what they can expect and what their customers can expect.

NAFA (National Alfalfa & Forage Alliance) has formulated a coexistence strategy. This could be used to begin an industry standard. The genetic suppliers have stated the GE presence should not exceed 3%. Then that should be the exact number for the future.

**SHOULD SUCH POLICIES AND MECHANISMS BE DETERMINED BY GOVERNMENT REGULATION OR BY INDUSTRY STANDARDS?**

There should be government standards so everyone is using a know basis. However, there should be no government regulation.

**HOW IMPORTANT IS A COEXISTENCE STRATEGY FOR ALFALFA?**

Co-existence for alfalfa is extremely important ant this time. Thirty five percent (35%) of alfalfa grown in Washington State is exported. The largest export customer at this time is Japan. The greater percentage of the Japanese market will not accept GE alfalfa (this is a very small segment that will purchase RR alfalfa). Until or unless there is a shift in that requirement co-existence is very critical. Some markets such as the UAE have no issue with GE alfalfa.

**ANY OTHER POINTS YOU'D LIKE TO MAKE?**

In summary, the United States still has a large demand for GE sensitive markets. Many growers in the United States produce only for domestic consumption and for those producers GE alfalfa

could increase options in planting schedules and in residual chemical from other types of cropping plans. Residual chemicals can be a problem for crop rotation and many of the chemicals currently registered for alfalfa production damage the alfalfa (reducing production).

Growers should have a choice but be sensitive to all choices: GE, conventional or organic.

#### **NOTE ON THIS PUBLICATION:**

*This article is published as a part of a panel discussion on Coexistence between Genetically-Engineered (GE) alfalfa and non-GE alfalfa held December 13, 2011 at Las Vegas, NV at the Western Alfalfa & Forage Conference. Each panelist was asked for their views on coexistence, guided by several specific questions. **Background:** As a general background, Roundup Ready alfalfa was first released in 2005, and subsequently the subject of a lawsuit which precluded further planting from 2007 through 2011, while USDA-APHIS conducted an Environmental Impact Study. A key component of both the lawsuit and the EIS was the question as to whether gene flow and contamination would harm non-GE growers. USDA-APHIS decided in 2010 that Roundup Ready alfalfa was safe for the environment and further plantings were authorized early in 2011. However, coexistence between divergent systems remains an important issue, particularly for organic growers, seed growers and companies, and exporters. Subsequent documentation and efforts to encourage coexistence and solve the issues between GE and non-GE production have been ongoing by farmers, companies, hay grower and seed groups, Universities, and government agencies.*