

The Grain Growers of Canada (GGC) takes advantage of that often mythical slack period between the last of the spring field work and the start of harvest to hold a summer meeting. This is an opportunity for members to get to know each other better, work through committee business and hear from leading agribusiness representatives.

A major part of the 2009 GGC summer meeting was spent on reports from their eight committees (Marketing; Safety Nets; Transportation; Trade; Public Research; Environment; Biotechnology, Regulations and GROU; Bio-Fuels and Bio-Products) and discussion of their progress and concerns.

Interspersed amongst the committee reports, were a number of excellent presentations from the private and public sector on the general theme of research and biotechnology. It was an indication of the GGC's influence over government policy and respect from the media as a voice of common sense, that the meeting heard from high profile presenters including: Dr. Rob Bruns, the head of Syngenta's NAFTA Cereal Seeds; Dr. Donald McKenzie, manager of Pioneer Hi-Bred's biotechnology, government and industry affairs; Dr. Steven Morgan Jones, Director General of Science Partnerships with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada; Brian Gilbertson, from Agrium's Corporate Relations Department; Richard Wansbutter, Vice President of Viterra's Government and Commercial Relations; and Paul Thiel, Vice President of Bayer CropScience Industry Relations and Market Development. These people are central in their organizations to making recommendations on research investment allocation and as such provide a real sense of the factors that influence the focus of research.

The common theme of the private sector presentations was: biotechnology; requirements these companies have to increase their investments in the Canadian crop sector; and challenges that exist in the current regulatory system that impede innovation in Canadian agriculture. Private industry is prepared to invest in crop research but this has to be conditional on realistic expectations for a return on investment. This means an emphasis on technology that can be used directly and, therefore, sold. To command investments, innovative agribusiness needs a competitive Intellectual Property (IP) environment. This includes patents, plant breeder's rights, and data protection. It is this type of regulatory environment that will attract global investments to keep Canadian growers competitive.

A good example would be varietal research and the challenges faced by industry in implementing biotechnology techniques for plant breeding. Emphasis to date has been on major crops including corn, soybeans, cotton and canola where prospective returns on research investments have been favorable. However, future applications of these technologies in other crops will depend on regulatory processes and public perception. The imminent challenge is with wheat, where political barriers to implementation still exist even in North America. How this unfolds in Canada will undoubtedly have a bearing on the future application of the technology to other crops.

Further, the major private sector research companies are multinational and, thus, there is an element of competition between countries when research projects are being considered. For example, private companies have avoided investing in European canola breeding where the approval process for genetically modified crops is uncertain. The Canadian canola industry has benefited immensely from Europe's tight regulatory requirements.

The Canadian pulse industry currently depends almost entirely on variety development from public and producer funded institutions such as Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the University of Saskatchewan's Crop Development Centre. If the pulse industry is going to benefit from biotechnology based breeding programs, we need to lobby for a Canadian regulatory environment that strongly supports private investment in research.

*David Walker is a freelance agricultural economist working for the Alberta Pulse Growers Commission. He can be reached at davidw@open-i.ca*

