

Pregnant cows in HT swedes warning

By ROB TIPPA

THE company that sold a herbicide-tolerant swede cultivar implicated in hundreds of cow deaths in Southland and South Otago this spring intends to continue marketing the crop, but with an endorsement to exclude certain stock classes.

That endorsement was likely to exclude pregnant dairy cows, PGG Wrightson Seeds' manager David Green said.

The company had chosen to take a conservative and "completely open and transparent" approach to future sales by selling the product with an endorsement because of issues with HT swedes that had caused liver damage, ill thrift, photosensitivity and deaths of cows in southern dairy herds in recent months.

"We are very anxious to understand what has occurred there but the vast majority of [HT swede] crops have performed very well in the past couple of years since it has been available," he said.

"Whilst we sympathise [with affected farmers] and we are working as hard as we can with others in the Southland swede working party to get a handle on what's going on, I think it's fair to say the science is fairly sketchy in this area and there are no quick answers."

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Green said the company knew through its own experience and that of vets and DairyNZ consultants that problems with swede crops this season were in no way exclusive to the HT swede cultivar.

"There are documented cases of this occurring on conventional swedes and many of those cultivars have been in the market for 20 years plus," he said. "We have heard of cows presenting with exactly the same symptoms on kale crops."

He said issues with stock deaths and health issues represented a very small proportion of HT swede crops sown last year.

"We are conscious that probably 95 per cent-plus of farmers who have used HT swedes this year and all farmers who have used HT swedes in the preceding two years since commercialisation have been very happy with them."

He said the company was fairly confident it was dealing with a combination of climatic factors that had caused health issues and deaths of dairy cows.

Green confirmed the company had sought a qualified assurance from the Environmental Risk Management Authority that the cultivar was not genetically modified and a scientific paper published by AgResearch Grasslands had confirmed that.

He said the cultivar was developed within the framework of a moratorium on genetically modified products in New Zealand.

Like the majority of brassica seeds on the market, HT swede seed is pre-treated with a fungicide and insecticide to improve germination and provide protection from insect damage.

"It is quite unique technology," Green said. "It has brought significant benefits to a lot of farmers who have struggled to grow viable swede crops."

Meanwhile DairyNZ is advising southern dairy farmers to seek expert advice from seed field reps, seed companies or farm consultants when finalising their crop selection options for next season.

Its latest advisory on its website stated research the Southland swede technical working group was undertaking into cow sickness and death on swede crops would not produce any clear conclusions in time for farmers' 2015 crop planting decisions.