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GM canola a growth crop for Canada

By **PHILIP HOPKINS**

GENETICALLY modified canola has become Canada's most valuable crop, is poised for more growth and is testimony to the country's innovation policy, according to a visiting Canadian grains executive.

Dennis Stephens, of the Canada Grains Council, said GM canola was introduced into Canada in 1995 as part of a government innovation policy.

Since then, the area sown to canola had increased from about 4 million hectares to almost 6 million hectares.

At the same time, the wheat area had declined from just under 12 million hectares to almost 8 million hectares.

"GM canola is often Canada's most valuable crop and has replaced wheat," Mr Stephens told the Australian Grains

Conference in Melbourne. "Why the emphasis on innovation? Geography and climate are restrictions on industry."

He said the three main prairie provinces produced 80 per cent of Canada's grain but were a long way from export ports.

Canada would never become a lowest-cost producer so had developed niche products in higher-value areas through innovation.

"Commercialisation of innovation is critical to industry's growth," he said.

Canada's Canola Council expected canola production to rise from 9.1 million tonnes in 2006 to 15 million tonnes in 2015. Ninety per cent of the crop was regular canola, with only 10 per cent dedicated to "designer" products. This would change to a ratio of 75:25 within six years.

There was a downward trend in Canadian wheat due to economic changes and more use of GM technology in canola, soybeans and corn, he said.

Mr Stephens said GM wheat was "not on the table" in Canada but it was in the back of the mind of a working group which was concerned with crop research.

"We all recognise some potential [GM] yield benefits, but there are significant hurdles in the international marketplace, which makes it hard to be enthusiastic when huge markets have a zero threshold."

This was where trade policy came in, and the aim was to get Canada's regulations in order, then push to have similar policies accepted internationally. This should create an environment to allow for introduction of GM wheat in the future, he said.