ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF POLLEN-MEDIATED GENE FLOW FROM GM HERBICIDE TOLERANT BRASSICA NAPUS INTO COMMON WILD RELATIVES IN IRELAND

Marcus J. Collier and Ewen Mullins

ABSTRACT

Although now we have had many years of research completed on assessing the potential environmental impact of GM crops, concern remains over their potential impact on biodiversity in the rural landscape. In particular, issues have arisen in regards to the modification of crops with traits that could introgress into sexually compatible wild relatives. In contrast to wheat, barley, potato and maize, Brassica napus (oilseed rape) is the only commercial crop grown in Ireland at present with the potential to successfully transfer its DNA, via pollen-mediated gene flow, into inter-related weed species. This review details the species in question and by examining the relevant literature that relates to Irish agronomic conditions, demonstrates that gene flow is likely to occur, especially to an earlier used cultivar, Brassica rapa. However, the critical factor remains not that GM traits will flow from the commercial source but what might the consequences of said gene flow events be. This review indicates that the conferred trait in question (in this case, herbicide tolerance) can only impact on weed diversity in the presence of selecting herbicide action. In the absence of the herbicide, the GM traits will be lost from the wild species over time and will not confer any selective advantage that could facilitate population growth.

INTRODUCTION

The management of agricultural landscapes is in continual flux and future land use dynamics are unknown (Ewert et al. 2005; Rounsevell et al. 2006; Levidow and Boschert 2008; Angus et al. 2009; Burgess and Morris 2009). This gives rise to concern over the future impact of agricultural activities on the environment, especially on landscape biodiversity. One issue relates to the potential impact of cultivating GM crops suited to the Irish tillage sector. Although the de facto EU moratorium on the planting of GM crops was lifted in 2004, GM cropping has not been established in Ireland principally due to the lack of varieties suited to the Irish agri-environment. Those traits that would be most suited include disease resistance and herbicide tolerance, with the latter typically conferred through resistance to the broad spectrum herbicide glyphosate. However, as the technology expands to meet global consumption necessities, it is pragmatic to assume that Irish farmers will soon be afforded the choice of certain GM varieties tailored to Irish conditions (O’Brien and Mullins 2009). Herbicide tolerant (HT) oilseed rape is a crop that would be most applicable to Irish tillage systems; enabling farmers to restrict competition by agricultural weeds during the early stages of seedling growth and may also enable farmers to adopt more benign management practices such as no-till (i.e. to eliminate the need for ploughing prior to seeding) or minimum tillage (min-till) management regimes (O’Brien and Mullins 2009). However, while GM HT oilseed rape would increase the flexibility of the cropping regime for the farmer, issues are often raised in regards to the level of risk associated with the escape of a HT trait into wild related species of the crop in question. Although alterations and innovations in GM crop management schemes has the potential to reduce the impact of the crops on the wider landscape (Mullins et al. 2009), the potential for genetic introgression of a GMHT trait into Irish wild relatives has yet to be gauged.

When looking at the potential impact of any GM plant in the Irish flora it is necessary to outline the current state of knowledge, but previous studies have demonstrated the lack of research on the impact of crops on the Irish agri-environment (O’Brien et al. 2008). Flora surveys are likewise poor. For many years, multiple surveys of the Irish flora have been carried out (Kollmann et al. 2009), but a high proportion are localized and...
place-specific, and mainly show presence/absence data only. With the advent of modern concerns for endangered or threatened plants, these early surveys part led to the creation of the Flora Protection Order in 1987 (S.I. no. 274), later amended in 1999 (S.I. no. 94) (Government of Ireland 1999). However, these are not necessarily reliable accounts of species abundance or of the modern distribution of fera crops that would facilitate deductions to be made on the potential national impact of a novel trait or GM crop. Modern surveys of the flora of the Irish landscape are also informed by earlier research and of the plants that have been identified as noxious weeds or invasive, none are feral crops. This review article is based on research carried out as part of the EPA funded STRIVE programme (Mullins and Collier 2011), tasked specifically to look at the potential impact of GMHT oilseed rape on rural biodiversity in Ireland. It is a critical assessment of the published literature and available data on this subject.

**BRASSICA NAPUS IN IRELAND**

Although *Brassica Napus* a globally important oil crop, it has been predicted that Irish oilseed rape hectarage could increase to 20,000ha by 2018 in order to supply high-value food, feed and industrial ingredients to the domestic market (Fig. 1, Teagasc 2008). Under certain conditions, oilseed rape can prevail locally after harvesting and persist in the following years as volunteers within the confines of a managed cropping system and as feral individuals in semi-wild habitats (e.g. roadways and hedges). Studies have shown that it can survive outside agronomic zones for up to five years (Lutman 1993) and possibly up to nine in certain circumstances (Lutman et al. 2005). Anecdotally *B. napus* is believed to be ubiquitous in the Irish landscape, prevailing as feral volunteers from agricultural activities. As these populations are coexisting with inter-related weed species, it is important to ask: if GMHT oilseed rape feral/volunteer populations emerge, can they act as a reservoir for the transfer of a HT trait into wild relatives and how long such a modified trait can persist. It is also necessary to examine this under modern agronomic conditions as the management of the crop can have as big an impact on biodiversity as the crop itself (Mullins et al. 2009).

**PREVALENCE OF WILD BRASSICACEAE IN IRELAND AND POTENTIAL FOR GENE FLOW**

The phenomenon of gene flow into wild *Brassicaceae* from cultivated *B. napus* has been researched widely, with work dating to long before GM crops were commercialized (e.g. U. 1935; Davey 1939; Percival 1947; Jenkinson and Glynne-Jones 1953). The issue has come to the fore, however, with the advent of GM crops and there have been multiple field trials completed outside of Ireland to establish the propensity for trait transfer from GMHT oilseed rape into near-relatives (Sweet and Shepperson 1997; Turner 2004). Daniels et al. (2005) carried out extensive surveys on multiple sites over three years and concluded that the transfer of herbicide tolerance ‘appears to be minimal’ (p. 20). Ellstrand et al. (1999) state that while hybridization within the *Brassica* family is very common there are no implications for either the evolution of problem ‘weeds’ or an extinction risk to ‘wild’ populations (p. 544) and Warwick et al. affirm that there is little evidence to show that the genes that code for herbicide resistance that are found in wild populations are ‘inherently risky’ (2008, p. 7).

However, it is important to consider the potential for weeds to evolve resistance to commercial herbicides (Waltz 2010) and worldwide a total of 360 ‘weeds’ biotypes (197 species) with an evolved resistance to modern herbicides have been recorded (Heap 2012). Given that resistant weeds are the direct result of herbicide overuse and the lack of an integrated weed management strategy (Egan et al. 2011), it is not surprising to see the epidemic of glyphosate-resistant weeds that has resulted from the overuse of glyphosate herbicide in the USA (Wright et al. 2010). There are 24 herbicide resistant ‘weeds’ in the UK and in 1996 one was identified in Ireland, *Stellaria media* (common chickweed). None of these plants are tolerant of, or resistant to, glyphosate and most are resistant to herbicides that are now prohibited (such as simazine) or to acetolactate synthase inhibitor herbicides (such as metsulfuron-methyl to which *S. media* has been found to be resistant). Nonetheless, when considering the potential hybridization between GMHT oilseed rape and its wild relatives it is prudent to bear in mind that the use of a GMHT variety must be implemented in parallel with a robust weed management strategy that incorporates both a diversity of chemical and nonchemical practices to reduce reliance on single herbicide chemistries.

Gene flow between *Brassica rapa*, *Brassica oleracea* and *Brassica nigra* as parents and *B. napus*, *Brassica juncea* and *Brassica carinata* as hybrids is well documented (U. 1935 (U’s Triangle); Gill and Year 1966) and the development and use of plastid (Flannery et al. 2006) and nuclear markers has clarified the origin of the amphidiploid *B. napus* (Allender and King 2010) and *Raphanus sativus*, which it is hypothesized was derived from a hybridization event between the *rapa/oleracea* and the *B. nigra* lineages of
the *Brassica* genus (Yang et al. 2002). Though ‘naturally occurring’ *Brassica* hybrids have not been specifically recorded (Daniels et al. 2005, p. 20) it must be recognized that it is relatively difficult to identify hybrid *Brassicas* in a natural landscape. Allainguillaume et al. (2006) have examined the fitness of *B. napus* and *B. rapa* hybrids in non-GM crosses and shown that ‘substantially fewer’ descendants will exhibit any traits that will permit the hybrids to persist. There are numerous studies of *B. napus* gene transfer to wild or feral species in the Netherlands (de Vries et al. 1992), Canada (Beckie et al. 2006), Australia (Salisbury 2002) and the US (Brown et al. 1997), countries where GM crops are currently in cultivation, and also from field trials in the UK (Raybould and Gray 1993).

Prior to quantifying the propensity for gene flow to wild relatives from an Irish context it is first necessary to establish the potential interrelated species of *B. napus* that may be present within the Irish agri-environment, and thus those that may be impacted upon by the flow of genetic material from the future cultivation of GMHT oilseed rape. Hypothetically there are around 100 species capable of hybridizing with *B. napus* (Eastham and Sweet 2002), most of whom have been demonstrated using in-hand or similarly forced experimentation techniques. As these hybridizations do not usually occur in real-world situations, it is necessary to first examine only those plants that have the potential to cross with oilseed rape under typical agricultural conditions. There are sixteen cruciferous species (*Brassicaceae*), which are believed to exist in or near agricultural landscapes in Ireland and are close relatives of *B. napus* (Table 1). The ‘rare’ and ‘occasional’ species were mostly identified in urban waste areas and have been assumed to be discarded food plants (Scannell and Synott 1972). Indeed, many of these records date from the early part of the last century and some may have been mistakenly identified (Reynolds 2002).

Of these sixteen species, one is believed to be a native species – *Raphanus raphanistrum* (Webb et al. 1996). However, it is unlikely that *R. raphanistrum* is indeed a native species and is more likely to have been introduced at some time by accident (Guiry and Guiry 2012). The remaining relatives of *B. napus* are also either deliberately or accidentally introduced (Reynolds 2002; Guiry and Guiry 2012), but these are now classed as ‘naturalised’ to some degree. Of these listed species, seven have been the subject of the vast majority of research into gene flow in other jurisdictions (Table 2) and have direct relevance to this discussion because the remaining eight have not been researched to any significant extent. However, very few detailed studies have been carried out on gene flow between *B. napus* and either *Brassica alba* or *B. nigra* (FitzJohn et al. 2007).

Hybridization between *B. napus* and *B. juncea* under field conditions has been demonstrated (Jorgensen and Andersen 1994). Others show hybrid pollen fertility under laboratory conditions and affirm that the possibility of wild hybridization ‘cannot be neglected’ (Frello et al. 1995, p. 240), though they do not demonstrate this in field trials. Some hybridization events have been recorded in both directions, with female *B. napus* being less successful (Jorgensen et al. 1998). Seedling survival is usually low and it has not been shown if any surviving seeds are viable. However, *B. juncea* is
Table 1—List of 16 species found in the ‘wild’ in Ireland closely related to *Brassica napus*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BRASSICACEAE (Cruciferae)</th>
<th>Common name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Abundance</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Brassica alba</em></td>
<td>White mustard</td>
<td>Cultivated ground, disturbed ground, roadsides, landfills (probably introduced with birdseed)</td>
<td>Rare/occasional</td>
<td>Introduced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Brassica fruticulosa</em></td>
<td>Twiggy turnip</td>
<td>Dublin port only</td>
<td>Very rare</td>
<td>Introduced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Brassica gallica</em> (Erucastrum pollichii)</td>
<td>Hairy rocket</td>
<td>Ports, disturbed ground, roadsides</td>
<td>Occasional</td>
<td>Introduced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Brassica juncea</em>&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Chinese/brown mustard</td>
<td>Ports, roadsides, (probably introduced with grain feed)</td>
<td>Rare</td>
<td>Introduced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Brassica nigra</em>&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Black mustard</td>
<td>Shingle, coastal locations in southern part of Ireland</td>
<td>Rare</td>
<td>Probably introduced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Brassica oleracea</em>&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Wild cabbage</td>
<td>Cultivation escape, landfills, waste areas, cliffs (SE UK only)</td>
<td>Rare</td>
<td>Introduced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Brassica rapa</em>&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt; (Brassica campestro)&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Wild turnip</td>
<td>Roadsides, ports, disturbed ground, mostly in southern Ireland esp. near coasts, UK: riverbanks/lakesides</td>
<td>Locally abundant</td>
<td>Probably introduced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Brassica tournefortii</em></td>
<td>Pale cabbage (Annual) Wall mustard</td>
<td>Dublin port</td>
<td>Rare</td>
<td>Introduced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Diplotaxis muralis</em></td>
<td>Wall rocket (Perennial)</td>
<td>Railways, dry banks, walls, cliffs, sandbanks</td>
<td>Occasional</td>
<td>Introduced/invasive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Diplotaxis tenuifolia</em></td>
<td>Wall rocket</td>
<td>Waste ground, disturbed ground</td>
<td>Rare</td>
<td>Introduced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Erucia vesicaria</em></td>
<td>Garden rocket</td>
<td>Landfill, waste ground, disturbed ground</td>
<td>Rare</td>
<td>Introduced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hirschfeldia incana</em> (Brassica adpressa)&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Hoary mustard</td>
<td>Dublin mainly, disturbed ground, gravel, roadsides, landfills (introduced with grain feed)</td>
<td>Occasional</td>
<td>Introduced/invasive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Raphanus raphanistrum</em> subsp. <em>raphanistrum</em>&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Wild radish</td>
<td>Cultivated ground, disturbed ground, roadsides</td>
<td>Occasional</td>
<td>Introduced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Raphanus raphanistrum</em> subsp. <em>Maritimus</em></td>
<td>Sea radish</td>
<td>Shingle beaches, coastal</td>
<td>Occasional</td>
<td>Introduced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Raphanus sativus</em></td>
<td>Garden radish</td>
<td>Roadsides, disturbed ground, cultivation escape</td>
<td>Rare</td>
<td>Introduced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sinapis arvensis</em>&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Charlock/white mustard</td>
<td>Cultivated ground, disturbed ground, roadsides, landfills</td>
<td>Occasional</td>
<td>Possibly introduced</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Sources: Scannell and Synnott (1972), Scheffler and Dale (1994), Webb, et al. (1996), Eastham and Sweet (2002), Reynolds (2002) and Guiry and Guiry (2012). It would, perhaps, be more appropriate to delineate their status as being ‘native’, ‘neophyte’, or ‘archaeophyte’ etc., but the sources for these species listed here do not list them as such, nor are definitions of such status universally agreed upon (Dunn and Heneghan 2011). It is perhaps better to regard the classifications used here in line with Preston et al. (2004), who suggest that their presence is more an hypotheses to be tested in specifically designed studies, something lacking in the Irish landscape.

<sup>b</sup>Species that have been the subject of the majority of published introgression research outside Ireland and thus may be species of concern (Flannery et al. 2005).

‘rarely cultivated in northern Europe’ (Jørgensen et al. 2004, p. 259) and to date has not been grown on a large commercial scale in Ireland. Laboratory hybridization between *B. napus* and *B. oleracea* has been partially successful (Kerlan et al. 1992), and though possible in the wild, the likelihood of hybridization in the agricultural landscape is negligible. Where artificial hybridization has been forced under laboratory conditions, the resulting seeds were non-viable and/or malformed. Naturalized
populations of *B. oleracea* are mostly located on cliff habitats in the UK, which are poorly suited for hybrid *B. oleracea × B. napus* seedling success (Wilkinson et al. 2000; Chèvre et al. 2004).

Hybrids of *B. napus* and *B. nigra* have been produced using hand pollination, but no hybridization has been recorded under naturally occurring conditions. It has been shown that hybridization between *B. napus* and *Hirschfeldia incana* can occur in field trial conditions (Eber et al. 1994), and that there may be some seed dormancy, intermediate between parents (Chadoeuf et al. 1998). Backcrossing for five generations produced no viable plants (Darmency and Fleury 2000), thus it

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hybridization potential between <em>B. napus</em> and...</th>
<th>Research conditions</th>
<th>Hybridization frequency</th>
<th>Rate of hybrid seedling survival</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Brassica juncea</em></td>
<td>Field trials</td>
<td>&lt;3%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Jørgensen et al. (1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Brassica oleracea</em></td>
<td>Laboratory</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>&lt;0.01%</td>
<td>Chiang et al. (1977)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Brassica nigra</em></td>
<td>Laboratory</td>
<td>0.1% (Male <em>B. napus</em> and female <em>B. nigra</em>)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Bing et al. (1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Laboratory</td>
<td>0.9–3.4% (Male <em>B. nigra</em> and female <em>B. napus</em>)</td>
<td>&lt;0.01%</td>
<td>Bing et al. (1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hirschfeldia incana</em> (Brassica adpressa)</td>
<td>Laboratory</td>
<td>1.3% (Male <em>B. napus</em> and female <em>H. incana</em>)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Kerlan et al. (1992)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Laboratory</td>
<td>3.1% (Male <em>H. incana</em> and female <em>B. napus</em>)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Kerlan et al. (1992)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Field trials</td>
<td>1.5% (Male <em>B. napus</em> and female <em>H. incana</em>)/70% (Male <em>H. incana</em> and female <em>B. napus</em>)</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>Lefol et al. (1996b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Field trials</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Darmency and Fleury (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Field trials</td>
<td>0.06%</td>
<td>0.01%</td>
<td>Chadoeuf et al. (1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Raphanus raphanistrum</em></td>
<td>Laboratory</td>
<td>0.2% (Male <em>B. napus</em> and female <em>R. raphanistrum</em>)</td>
<td>&lt;0.01%</td>
<td>Darmency et al. (1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Field trials</td>
<td>&lt;0.01% (Male <em>B. napus</em> and female <em>R. raphanistrum</em>)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Chèvre et al. (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Field trials</td>
<td>0.009% (Male <em>R. raphanistrum</em> and female <em>B. napus</em>)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Warwick et al. (2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sinapis arvensis</em></td>
<td>Field trials</td>
<td>0.1% (Male <em>B. napus</em> and female <em>S. arvensis</em>)/1.2% (Male <em>S. arvensis</em> and female <em>B. napus</em>)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Lefol et al. (1996a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Field trials</td>
<td>0.0001% (Male <em>B. napus</em> and female <em>S. arvensis</em>)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Daniels et al. (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Brassica rapa</em> (Brassica campestris)</td>
<td>Field trials</td>
<td>0.4–1.5% (Male <em>B. napus</em> and female <em>B. rapa</em>)</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>Scott and Wilkinson (1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Field trials</td>
<td>0.0008</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Daniels et al. (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wild</td>
<td>7.1% (Male <em>B. rapa</em> and female <em>B. napus</em>)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Warwick et al. (2003)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
can be deduced that there can be little successful gene introgression between \textit{B. napus} and \textit{H. incana}. Hybridization between \textit{B. napus} and \textit{R. raphanistrum} has also occurred under field conditions (Eber et al. 1994) but with very low seedling emergence (Guérin et al. 2003). Integration of \textit{B. napus} genes into \textit{R. raphanistrum} was not observed by the third backcross (Chèvre et al. 1998). Similar results to experiments with \textit{H. incana} were shown, after five years of backcross observation (Jørgensen 1999). Warwick et al. noted that successful hybridization was ‘extremely rare’ (2003, p. 536) which mirrors similar conclusions from earlier research by Chèvre et al. (1997). Open pollination between \textit{B. napus} and \textit{Sinapis arvensis} did not produce viable hybrids (Bing et al. 1991; Lefol et al. 1991) and it is concluded that spontaneous hybridization is unlikely to be successful under natural conditions (Bing et al. 1996). If it does occur it is of such low probability (Warwick et al. 2003) that it is negligible (Hails and Morley 2005). Both plants are considered to be sexually incompatible under natural conditions (Downey 1999; Eastham and Sweet 2002) and there is an extremely low probability of viable hybridization occurring (Moyes et al. 2002, p. 103).

In contrast, hybridization between \textit{B. napus} and \textit{B. rapa} is believed to be a common event and most of the research on this subject derives from GM trials. Sweet et al. (1999) examined in-crop persistence and prevalence of \textit{B. napus} × \textit{B. rapa} hybrids and deduced that persistence was ‘not enhanced by specific genetic modification’ (Sweet et al. 1999 online). This was similar to other studies (Crawley). However, introgression in the natural landscape was extensively noted in the UK (Norris et al. 2004), where \textit{B. rapa} is relatively common on riverbanks in some locations. Norris and Sweet (2002) note that while hybrids of \textit{B. napus} and \textit{B. rapa} are fertile, their seed abundance is relatively low. Norris et al. (2004) estimate that non-GM introgression may have occurred over many years.

It is clear that \textit{B. rapa} is the principal ‘wild’ relative that can hybridize with \textit{B. napus} (Scheffler and Dale 1994). It is believed that there are two subspecies in the Irish landscape. The first subspecies is a ‘weedy’ remnant of agricultural activity, \textit{B. rapa} subsp. \textit{oleifera}, and this may be found within the \textit{B. napus} crop rotation system. Since \textit{B. napus} cultivation is often preceded and/or followed by a cereal crop (such as wheat) \textit{B. rapa} is managed using herbicides targeted for broadleaf weeds. However, when \textit{B. napus} is cultivated \textit{B. rapa} may reappear within the crop. A second, ‘wilder’ subspecies of \textit{B. rapa} (subsp. \textit{sylvestris}) may be found in semi-natural habitats, mostly riverbanks, canals and lakesides (A ‘wild’ plant in this case is one that grows and reproduces ‘without being planted’ (Ellstrand et al. 1999) and not necessarily a plant that is native, near-native, naturalized, invasive or introduced.). Due to its similar morphology to \textit{B. napus}, \textit{B. rapa} in semi-natural landscapes can be difficult to identify accurately. Its exact distribution in the UK is not known (Wilkinson et al. 2003), and no information on its Irish distribution can be located (though it is believed to be absent from Northern Ireland (Wilkinson et al. 2003)). Indeed, the two subspecies have not been identified either in the three principal Irish flora surveys – Scannell and Synnott (1972), Webb et al. (1996) and Reynolds (2002), or in the New Flora of the British Isles (2nd edn) (Stace 1991).

However, there is some evidence from agri-environmental researchers and farmers that \textit{B. rapa} is locally abundant in marginal landscapes in southern Ireland. The flowering time of \textit{B. napus} (both Winter and Spring varieties) has been shown to overlap with the flowering time of some of its wild relatives, especially \textit{B. rapa} (Colbach et al. 2008). Flanagan (2010) examined co-synchronous flowering of these \textit{Brassicae} in Leinster, also showing a continuous overlap between the flowering periods of two plants and in outdoor experimental conditions recorded a hybridization rate of c. 6%. Cloney (2003) has also sampled \textit{B. rapa} growing outside cultivated areas in Southern Ireland and shows that these populations may have interbred with early oilseed varieties, but that under ecological conditions this was of no advantage to these wild populations.

Thus, gene flow from \textit{B. napus} to \textit{B. rapa} can be expected (Lutman et al. 2004; Begg et al. 2006), but is there likelihood that such a crop-to-wild relative hybrid population will prevail? Traits such as herbicide tolerance (from GMHT \textit{B. napus}) have been shown to gradually diminish over time within hybrid populations (Warwick et al. 2008). Gene flow to the other six near-relatives (\textit{B. juncea}, \textit{B. oleracea}, \textit{B. nigra}, \textit{H. incana}, \textit{R. raphanistrum} and \textit{S. arvensis}), while technically possible (via artificial hybridization techniques), is unlikely to give rise to a persistent or prevalent population of hybrids in Ireland. Table 2 illustrates the principal trials in this area and shows that while there is some potential for gene flow from oilseed rape to its wild progenitors, much of the literature contains examples of forced laboratory experiments and not conditions that may be found under normal agronomic practices.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Changes and intensification of agricultural activity over the decades have brought about significant alterations in land management practices and landscape change. This has had a largely negative effect on species and habitats, but in Ireland it has also created the landscapes that are familiar today. With
the global area of GM cropping increasing and with the ever-growing demand for food from an expanding population, it is inevitable that in the coming years will soon be afforded a choice as to whether they wish to avail of specific GM varieties. Herbicide tolerance will be one of the first traits available and with its uptake, the management practices of Irish farmers will change, and despite commonly held beliefs, such land management changes may be of a more long-term benefit to overall landscape biodiversity (Mullins et al. 2009; Collier and Mullins 2010; Mullins and Collier 2011).

Whereas the distribution of B. rapa in Ireland is unknown it is anecdotally assumed to be widespread, but the lack of baseline data impedes functional calculations on rates of hybridization between B. napus and B. rapa. Furthermore, while gene flow from GMHT B. napus gene flow into B. rapa will occur, the HT trait will not persist unless selected for by the use of the relevant herbicide (Wilkinson et al. 2003). Although, there may be many relatives of B. napus in the Irish agri-environmental landscape, and these are likely to be neophytes or even archaeophytes (and there is now a requirement for this to be explored in detail), the potential for successful gene flow from B. napus to these relatives is negligible. Finally, it should be borne in mind that there are now a plethora of specifically designed crops that are borne in mind that there are now a plethora of specific hybrids: an assessment of transgene dispersal. (Chevre, A.-M., Eber, F., Baranger, A. and Renard, M. 2007-B-DS-1-S1) and Teagasc, the Irish Agricultural and Food Development Authority. We would like to thank Dr. Karen Foley for her suggestions on an earlier draft of this article, and also to thank the editor and reviewers for their very helpful and insightful comments and constructive suggestions.

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