

U.S. ag researcher says he's paid high price for his views

By Barb Glen

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Kevin Folta is no stranger to controversy. The University of Florida researcher and agriculture communicator is frequently pilloried by some factions in social media for his explanations about agricultural practices, biotechnology and crop chemistry.

He regularly blogs, tweets and podcasts about the latest concerns regarding food safety, yet on one topic at least, he feels his words fall on deaf ears.

That topic is glyphosate, the most commonly used herbicide in agriculture. Folta frequently explains there is no scientific support for assertions that it causes cancer.

"I don't think we're making headway. I think we're losing ground," he said in a Dec. 12 interview.

"And that's because it is a chemical used to control weeds. Anything that ends in 'icide' automatically has some strikes against it. The other problem we have is that we have very, very good ability to detect things that are almost not there."

Technology now allows the identification of parts per billion and parts per trillion, indicating presence of glyphosate in some foods even when the amount is minuscule.

Folta has been accused of accepting funds from Monsanto to finance some of his research projects and has sued the New York Times for a report that the company paid him to do "biotechnology outreach" and defend genetically modified food.

He is not a man who backs down from a fight and at the recent Farming Smarter conference in Lethbridge, he asked farmers to use social media, as he does, despite potential pitfalls.

"It is natural to not want to engage in conflict, especially with people who have no credibility and people who sometimes are playing dirty themselves," he said.

"But the problem is that we've given them that environment for a long time and the discussion has been asymmetrical, where it has been all fear and all driven by people with agendas.

"We have a different agenda and that's about sustainable farming. We have to do it even if there is some conflict around it because people don't know what to trust and we can show them by taking the high road and telling the truth."

Folta said he has paid a price for being outspoken about farming technology and, as he puts it, "simply talking about science."

He believes it is the foundation for a divorce and other conflicts in his personal life and has cost his university millions in legal fees and public records requests.

“My university has been very good because I’ve always been on the correct side of the controversy. I’ve simply corrected the record for those who aren’t telling the truth,” he said.

“Whereas other universities have told their researchers, ‘do not engage, stay down,’ my university has said, ‘you do it because it’s the right thing to do.’ ”

Still, there have been times when quitting has seemed the easier option.

“It’s about standing up for what’s the truth and I think the thing that gets me through it every day is that I’m telling the truth and that in five years, 10 years, maybe 20 years, we’ll look back and see the difference we made.”