

BACKGROUND

MONSANTO:

FOOD, HEALTH, HOPE™

by **A.V. KREBS**

It has become no small concern worldwide to family farmers, consumers, and environmentalists that the Monsanto Company, given its history and its present direction in attempting to establish itself as the world's leader in "life sciences," has chosen to "trademark," or in other words "register with a government agency to assure its use exclusively by the owner of the mark "Food—Health—Hope."¹

When corporate agribusiness sets out to transform our farms and ranches, the traditional source of our food and fiber, into modern bioengineering workshops designed to suit their narrow corporate interests, farmers and various other producers of our food see themselves being sold into economic slavery. Meanwhile, large numbers of the world community are gradually discovering that the increasing quantitative and qualitative price for such self-serving corporate gimmickry continues to escalate.

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Photo by Impact Visuals/ J. B. McCourtney

A tractor—sprayer/combine—can mix, handle, and apply pesticides in the fields.

Striving to take the leadership in such a corporate-dominated age of prescription agriculture and food, or “life sciences” is the Monsanto Company, headquartered in St. Louis, Missouri.

Setting out to forever change how food and fiber are produced, the 97-year-old chemical firm has asserted that as a corporation it is “developing a way to use Mother Nature to modify organisms to serve us better. We have a new business focus: life sciences—a startup industry that addresses the food and health needs of a rapidly expanding world while recognizing the importance of environmental sustainability. We have a new outlook on life: a better life for our planet.”²

Roughly translated, even Monsanto has come to recognize that agriculture and the environment cannot continue to tolerate the massive amounts of chemical poisons and fertilizers that are in use today. Since Monsanto has been a major and profitable producer of such materials, it needs to find substitutes to continue keeping its stockholders happy, while at the same time trying to convince the world that biotechnology is a safe and sane alternative.

“Research and development isn’t part of the strategy. Research and

development *is* the strategy,” Richard J. Mahoney, the company’s former chairman and chief executive officer, declared seven years ago.³ At that time there were thirty biotech companies; today there are seven.⁴

As the May 27, 1998 *The Wall Street Journal* declared: “Monsanto Co. and DuPont Co. are betting the farm in bids to transform themselves into the Coke and Pepsi of genetically engineered crops. In the three years since the first transgenic seeds were introduced, crop biotechnology has grown from a young science to a hot business: About half of U.S. cotton fields, forty percent of soybean fields, and twenty percent of corn fields this year are genetically altered. Now, in a stunningly swift concentration of power, much of the design, harvest, and processing of genetically engineered crops is coming under these two companies.”⁵

An example of that “stunningly swift concentration of power” came in the summer of 1998 when Cargill Inc. (the nation’s largest private corporation and one of the world’s leading grain traders) and Monsanto announced the signing of a letter of intent to form a worldwide joint venture to create and market new products enhanced through biotechnology for the grain processing and animal feed markets.

Although it has been taking tremendous strides towards becoming the dominate force in world-wide agricultural biotechnology, Monsanto’s path to such total control has become strewn with pitfalls.

Robert B. Shapiro, the current chairman of the board and CEO of Monsanto, was recently given a taste of tofu cream pie by the “Anti-Genetix” splinter faction of the Biotic Baking Brigade (BBB). He was hit in the face with the pie (a sweet potato pie just missed its target) after giving the keynote address at the State of the World Forum conference in the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco, California.

The vegan tofu cream pie symbolized the millions of acres of Monsanto’s genetically engineered soybean crops and other “Frankenfoods” coming to harvest in the 1998 season. The sweet potato pie was tossed in recognition of a October 25th *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* cover story, “Playing God in the Garden” by Michael Pollan, which detailed the fraud, deception, and legacy Monsanto has given the world, using the genetically-engineered “New Leaf Russet Burbank Potato” as an example.⁶

Criticism of Monsanto’s tactics has also come from within agribusiness itself. Willy de Greef, head of regulatory

and government affairs at Novartis Seeds in Basel, Switzerland, has been one of many in the biotech industry to recently attack their rival for the unprecedented consumer backlash in European countries to genetically engineered food.

"We have a PR mountain to climb. You have a problem if the market leader has firmly set ideas about how to do things, which others might not agree with. An expensive failure can be made into an asset if you've learned from it, but Monsanto still has some learning to do."

Since 1997 when Monsanto's herbicide-resistant Roundup Ready soya beans were first shipped to Europe mixed with ordinary soya, polls have shown that consumer acceptance of engineered food has collapsed in Europe. Consumers interpreted the move as a ploy to force biotech engineered soya down European throats and now the entire industry is having to deal with the consequences of that miscalculation.⁸

Likewise, outraged members of the British Parliament and many of the country's environmentalists have accused U.S. President Bill Clinton of intruding in a sensitive domestic matter. "It is quite wrong for the British Prime Minister to be conspiring behind the back of the British public about American business interests," said Norman Baker, Liberal Democrat environment spokesman. What had the British so angry is the report that Clinton personally intervened with British Prime Minister Tony Blair to stop Britain from halting the controversial production of genetically engineered foods.⁹

It is no accident that Clinton should be promoting genetically modified crops. Their primary U.S. manufacturer, Monsanto, has been one of five companies spearheading Clinton's welfare-to-work programs. Monsanto was among those donating thousands of dollars in "soft money" to the Clinton 1996 election and which the President singled out for praise during his State of the Nation address in 1997.¹⁰ In addition, currently sitting on Monsanto's

board of directors is former U.S. Secretary of Commerce, U.S. Trade Representative, and National Chairman for the 1992 Clinton-Gore Campaign—Mickey Kantor.¹¹

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Shortly after such condemnations from abroad, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) announced that it would "not incorporate into its breeding materials any genetic systems designed to prevent seed germination." With that statement the Terminator—and related genetic seed sterilization technology—has been banned from the crop breeding programs of the world's largest international agricultural research network.

"This is in recognition," CGIAR stated, "of

- a. concerns over potential risks of its inadvertent or unintended spread though pollen,
- b. the possibilities of sale or exchange of inviable seed for planting,
- c. the importance of farm-saved seed, particularly to resource-poor farmers;
- d. potential negative impacts on genetic diversity and
- e. the importance of farmer selection and breeding for sustainable agriculture."¹²

"It's a courageous decision. The CGIAR has done the right thing, for the right reasons," says Pat Mooney,

Executive Director of Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI), "a ban on Terminator is a pro-farmer policy in defense of world food security."¹³

The CGIAR is a network of sixteen international agricultural research centers, which collectively form the world's largest public plant breeding effort for resource-poor farmers. The Terminator genetic engineering technique renders farm-saved seed sterile, forcing farmers to return to the commercial seed market every year. The technology is aimed primarily at seed markets in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where over 1.4 billion people depend on farm-saved seed and on-farm plant breeding.¹⁴

Since the Terminator was developed jointly by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Delta & Pine Land (now a Monsanto subsidiary), Mooney says the policy is "a slap in the face to the U.S. government—a major CGIAR funder—and to Monsanto because it soundly negates their claims that sterilizing seeds will boost plant breeding in marginal areas and help feed the hungry."¹⁵

In the U.S. Monsanto has opened more than 475 seed piracy cases nationwide, generated from over 1800 leads.¹⁶ According to Monsanto's Kate Marshall, more than 250 of these cases are under active investigation by five full-time and a number of part-time investigators, and Pinkertons, a private detective firm. More than 100 cases have already been settled. For sometime now Monsanto has been cracking down on farmers who "illegally" save and replant seeds containing "patented technology."¹⁷

Defending Monsanto's action, Scott Baucum, chief of the company's seed piracy enforcement arm, points out: "Monsanto invests many years and millions of dollars in biotech research to bring growers new technologies sooner rather than later. When growers save and replant patented seed, there is less incentive for companies to invest in future technologies that will ultimately benefit farmers."¹⁸



Cotton farmers in India have been fighting, both through civil disobedience and even violent means, what is essentially a last-ditch battle to preserve not just their traditional cultivation practices, but more significantly their livelihoods which are at stake.



Photo courtesy of ecoropa, France

Farmers in the Karnataka state of India have targeted Monsanto's bollgard cotton field trials and a test cotton field was reduced to ashes. In the neighboring state of Andhra Pradesh, farmers destroyed Monsanto's bollgard field trial in a village in the Warangal district.

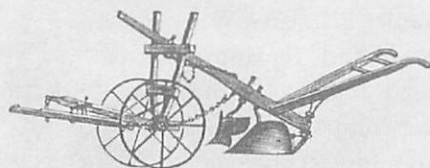
Prior to this campaign, which has been called "Cremation Monsanto," the state legislature of Andhra Pradesh unanimously resolved to adopt measures to prevent the entry of the Terminator gene in the guise of bollgard or through any other means. Activists of Rytu Sangham (AP Farmers Association) also stormed Monsanto's office in that state's capital, Hyderabad, on December 1, 1998. As a result of all these actions the Andhra Pradesh state government has asked Mahyco Monsanto Biotech (India) to stop all of its field trials being conducted in seven districts of the state.¹⁹

In recent years cotton farmers in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnatak, and Maharashtra have been committing suicide, unable to bear the burden of increasing debts due to crop failures.

The crop failures were essentially due to spurious seeds and pesticides manufactured and sold by unscrupulous private dealers who had lured farmers through credit. When the crops failed, farmers unable to pay back their debts consumed those very pesticides to commit suicide. Farmers in those states see the introduction of the so-called genetically modified, pest-resistant varieties as further attempts at enslavement.²⁰

These three states have historically been the major producers of cotton and provided the raw material for India's famed cotton textiles exported throughout the world for several hundred years before the British conquest. Britain forcibly displaced indigenous varieties, irretrievably leading to the loss of indigenous cotton genetic resources.

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New York City consumers protest Monsanto's rBGH.

Photo by Impact Visuals/Catherine Smith

Although approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in 1993, the artificial hormone—rBST, also called rBGH—has been linked to cancer, is banned throughout Europe, and unapproved in several other countries because of human health concerns.

Meanwhile, appearing before Canada's Senate Standing Committee on Agriculture and Forestry on October 22, 1998, scientists from Health Canada's Human Safety Division testified that not only have they been "pressured," but "bribed" with offers of between one and two million dollars to approve the controversial recombinant Bovine Somatotrophin (rBST), intended to boost milk production in dairy cattle.

"We have been pressured and coerced to pass drugs of questionable safety, including rBST," Dr. Shiv Chopra told the committee.²²

rBST (called rBGH, recombinant Bovine Growth Hormone, in the U.S.) is an artificial growth hormone that is estimated to increase milk production in cows from ten to fifteen percent. The drug has been widely used in the U.S. since being approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 1993, but

remains unapproved in Canada and much of Europe. The Canadian Senate had been investigating rBST for nearly a year and requested testimony from a group of five scientists after they filed a grievance with a government internal labor board that they were being pressured to sign off on a drug they felt had yet to be sufficiently tested.²³

In the U.S., the use of rBGH has been vigorously defended by Monsanto. In the case of Jane Akre and Steve Wilson, two award-winning investigative reporters at the Fox-affiliate television station (WTVT-13) in Tampa, Florida, its use has been defended at any cost.

The husband and wife investigative team who have blown the whistle on the story say WTVT-13 and its corporate bosses preferred to cover-up rather than broadcast honestly and accurately. The four-part story, documented in a lawsuit the reporters have filed,

reveals the widespread use of the rBGH hormone, which Florida dairymen have been secretly injecting into their cows. Their story, generally ignored by the nation's major media, is presented in full detail at a special internet web site and can be viewed at <http://www.foxbghsuit.com>.²⁴

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The reporters' never-broadcast report also revealed how Florida supermarkets quietly reneged on promises not to sell milk from treated cows until the hormone gained widespread acceptance by consumers. The major supermarkets now admit rBGH has found its way into virtually all of Florida's milk supply.²⁶

The reporters in their suit charge in detail that Fox Television (owned by Rupert Murdoch's multi-national News Corporation) was strongly pressured by Monsanto, and violated the state's whistle-blower act by firing the journalists when they threatened to report the station's conduct to the Federal Communications Commission and for refusing to broadcast false reports. The journalists filed the suit after struggling with WTVT-13 executives for most of 1997 to get the story on the air, submitting over 70 drafts of a script, all found "unacceptable" by the station.

"Every editor has the right to kill a story and any honest reporter will tell you that happens from time to time when a news organization's self interest wins out over the public interest," said Wilson, the station's former senior investigative reporter who helped Akre produce the story and is now one of the plaintiffs.

"But when media managers who are not journalists have so little regard for

the public trust that they actually order reporters to broadcast false information and slant the truth to curry the favor or avoid the wrath of special interests as happened here, that is the day any responsible reporter has to stand up and say, "No way!" That is what Jane and I are saying with this lawsuit," Wilson said.²⁷

In addition to the current controversies surrounding Monsanto, its past environmental and product safety record provides no feeling of security among many when it comes to the development of new products.

- Their agricultural chemical poison LASSO (which contains the highly toxic alachlor) was banned in 1987 by Canada and Massachusetts after it was found that traces of the chemical caused cancer in laboratory animals and was present in local drinking water supplies.²⁸
 - A leading manufacturer of Agent Orange, the defoliant containing dioxin used during the war in Southeast Asia, Monsanto claimed it to be "the most tested chemical substance in the world." The company was ordered in 1984 to pay some 65 percent of the \$180 million awarded to Vietnam war veterans exposed to the dangerous chemical.²⁹
 - After a dioxin spill near Sturgeon, Missouri in 1979, the company was found guilty of negligence after the longest jury trial in American history. Monsanto had failed to notify nearby residents of the spill and was ordered to pay over \$16 million in damages.³⁰
 - After the Pesticide Action Network (PAN) had included it in their infamous "Dirty Dozen Campaign,"
- Monsanto phased out its production of ethyl parathion in 1986. It was charged that the acutely toxic organophosphate, used mostly on cotton, might be responsible for fully half of the chemical-poison related deaths in Central America alone.³¹
 - Workers in a Nitro, West Virginia production facility received over \$1 million in 1988 after it was shown that workers were exposed to the dioxin contaminant in the herbicide 2, 4 5-T, which Monsanto produced from 1948 to 1969.³²
 - The family of a Monsanto employee who died of leukemia caused by exposure to benzene was awarded \$108 million after a jury found that the company knew of the danger and failed to disclose the hazard.³³
 - G.D. Searle, Monsanto's pharmaceutical subsidiary, produced a birth control device marketed under the name Copper-7 Intrauterine Device, which has been the object of hundreds of claims stemming from the problems it has caused women, including sterility.³⁴
 - A similar but less publicized controversy than that surrounding rBGH focused on Monsanto's sugar substitute, aspartame, marketed under the name of NutraSweet and Equal. The world's "first branded ingredient," NutraSweet is sold principally to Coca-Cola and Pepsi, and is used in 161 soft drinks and some 3000 other products. NutraSweet was developed by G.D Searle, which was purchased in 1985 for \$2.7 billion by Monsanto. By 1989 Monsanto was clearly the industry's leader in the production of artificial sweeteners with a 70 percent market share.³⁵

As Brian Toker has written in *The Ecologist*: "The 'second Green Revolution' promised by Monsanto and other biotechnology companies threatens even greater disruptions in traditional land tenure and social relations. In rejecting Monsanto and its biotechnology, we are not necessarily rejecting technology *per se*, but seeking to replace a life-denying technology of manipulation, control, and profit with a genuinely ecological technology, designed to respect the patterns of nature, improve personal

and community health, sustain land-based communities, and operate at a genuinely human scale."

"If," he adds, "we believe in democracy, it is imperative that we have the right to choose which technologies are best for our communities, rather than having unaccountable institutions like Monsanto decide for us. Rather than technologies designed for the continued enrichment of a few, we can ground our technology in the hope of a greater harmony between our human communities and the natural world.

Our health, our food, and the future of life on earth truly lie in the balance."³⁶ ■

**A.V. KREBS is author of
*The Corporate Reapers:
The Book of Agribusiness*
(New York: Essential Books,
1992) and is director of the
Corporate Agribusiness
Research Project.**

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Contact Your Representatives on Genetically Engineered Foods

Information available at the following web sites:

Campaign for Food Safety: www.purefood.org

Campaign to Label Genetically Engineered Foods: www.thecampaign.org

Sample letter to your member of Congress

Representative _____
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Request for Legislation on Genetically Engineered Foods

Dear Representative _____

I am very concerned that I am eating genetically engineered foods without being told, and without adequate safety studies. I am sending you this letter to insist that legislation be passed into law that will impose a moratorium on genetically engineered foods until they are proven safe, and require genetically engineered foods to be labeled as such, regardless of whether the food is in its whole form or as an ingredient in processed foods. Public opinion polls show a majority of Americans want these foods labeled (81 percent in a January 11, 1999, *Time* magazine poll).

Our regulatory agencies are being negligent in guaranteeing food safety and protecting the rights of the American public to know what they are eating. I am asking you to act legislatively to stop this neglect of the public interest.

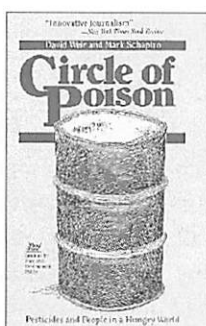
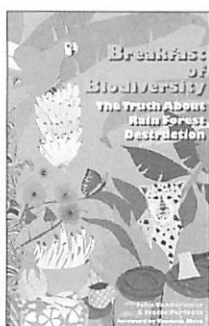
I do not want to eat genetically engineered foods for a variety of reasons. But without labeling I am denied the ability to make that choice. So I am asking you to pass legislation to label all genetically engineered foods. Similar labeling legislation has already been passed in Europe and Australia. This is an issue of consumers' safety and basic right to know.

Please write back to me and let me know if you intend to work to pass such legislation.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

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Paperback, \$18.95
- ☐ *Breakfast of Biodiversity: The Truth About Rain Forest, Destruction*, by John Vandermeer and Ivette Perfecto
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- ☐ *Farm Workers in the 90s: Where Do We Stand?* (1994)
- ☐ *Warning: Corporate Meat and Poultry May Be Hazardous to Workers, Farmers, the Environment, and Your Health* (1994)
- ☐ *Silent Spring II: Recent Discoveries Reveal New Threats of Pesticides to Our Health* (1997)
- ☐ *Monsanto: Food—Health—Hope™* (1999)

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NOTES

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