

The Corporate Control of Agriculture

A Minute with Jamie



by Jamie Ramirez

seeds anyway or purchasing a them through a third party. If Monsanto finds out, they will sue. The website also states that they will not exercise their patent rights "where trace amounts of our patented seeds are present in a farmer's fields as a result of inadvertent means." At the same time they reinforce the fact that they will fiercely guard their patenting rights, no matter who it affects. The farmers that do get sued would much rather settle than having to go through trial. Information about Monsanto's investigative processes can be found on their website.

As I stated earlier, I have no real problem with bio-engineering, genetic research, genetic engineering, or any other research done to keep the human species moving forward in evolution. I hope that this is also Monsanto's pledge. I fear that such a large corporation is only in it for the money and the power. If this is the case, farmers have been pushed to the wayside, have been deemed as unimportant, and have been forgotten. They must not be forgotten, they are one of the most important industries, and always have been.

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ery potato in Ireland.

The lesson here: any plant that is going to be used as a monoculture has genetic uniformity which, in turn, would make it most susceptible to disease and pests. If there is more than one kind of plant, even if some of the crops are destroyed, the surviving crops can still be harvested.

Eventually the 20th century brought about radical changes in agriculture and industrialization. It introduced new chemicals to help the large and small farmer deal with unwanted pests and weeds.

World War I introduced the use of nerve gas as a weapon. These nitrogen based bombs were then modified to bring about a new kind of insecticide. D.D.T. was "the hero of its generation." The regular use of these new chemicals meant the farmer could have a higher yield and larger production means higher availability. By the mid 20th century the world was well on its way towards the "green revolution." The goal was to systemize agriculture, increase productivity, and bring it and technology together.

However, another problem started developing. The more the farmers sprayed, the more they needed to spray. Farmers would have to use more pesticides, which would increase the cost of their crops; these pesticides would pollute the air and water, which would cause an increased health risk. Eventually a company stepped in to stop this vicious cycle.

Monsanto introduced Round-Up, a chemical that will effectively destroy any unwanted weeds; but they didn't stop there.

By the 1990's many started building on the technology of gene splicing. This was done with seeds and this same company, Monsanto, introduced genetically modified seeds known as "Round-Up Ready" seeds. These are seeds that are made with Round-Up technology so they can be immune to spraying. To clarify, there is a difference between "biotechnology" and "genetic modification." According to Human Genome Project information page www.ornl.gov, "genetic

modification' is the change in genetic makeup of a plant, human, animal or any other living thing. Whereas 'biotechnology' is a more general term and is used in reference to the use of organisms or their components."

These seeds have been designed to be sprayed.

Monsanto banked on this opportunity to not only sell herbicides and pesticides to farmers and the general public, but they could also sell genetically modified (GM) seeds. Monsanto's Bt ready corn is registered as an insecticide. Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) is a naturally occurring bacterial toxin, corn borers, and any other threatening insect will eat a part of the corn and die. There are numerous seeds Monsanto distributes with pesticides already incorporated into the genetic makeup of the seed. They also have fungicide and insecticide treatments for seeds.

According to their website, www.monsanto.com, Monsanto, is "a relatively new company" that "shares the name and history of a company that was founded in 1901 and originated in artificial sweeteners;" the most famous: Sweet and Low. The Monsanto of today, which was started in 1945, is focused on "agriculture and supporting farmers around the world in their mission to produce more, while conserving more." They sell, research, and distribute genetically engineered seeds and agricultural chemicals. The goal of the company, and also the farmer, is to systemize agriculture to be able to increase productivity.

When Monsanto started genetically modifying seeds there had never been a patent on life. In 1978, Dr. Ananda Chakrabarty, an engineer for General Electric, created a new oil eating microbe. When he tried to take it to the patent office they rejected his idea.

The right for this patenting went to the Supreme Court with a one vote majority decision to patent a microbe that was never used. Once the patent for this microbe went through, the floodgates were opened for the right to patent seeds; and life. This is

something that was never voted on by Congress or the people.

Let's stop here and ask ourselves a few questions. Is it wrong to take something, alter it genetically, and make a patent for it, morally or ethically? If it's done with seeds, where does it stop? But maybe I'm getting a little ahead of myself. I have no problem with biomedical engineering or genetic research. There are many life saving products that have been brought to us through this process. I also hope that one day we will have the technology to replace and fix our numerous health problems, after all this can't be done without biogenetic research. According to Monsanto they try to work with the farmer to bring about a sustainable agriculture with fewer chemicals and less pollution. This can bring about less cost and a greater yield. However, this company has come under a lot of scrutiny since the beginning of the distribution of their genetically modified seeds. During the Reagan Administration there was more and more patenting of genes.

On August 6, 1998 farmer Percy Schmeiser from Saskatchewan, Canada was sued by Monsanto for patent infringement when they found Round-Up Ready crops on his property. Percy states in the documentary that he and his wife had to destroy hundreds of pounds of seeds because they had been contaminated with Round-Up Ready seeds. According to Monsanto, Percy harvested the Round-Up Ready crops, saved the seeds and planted them again the following year. They claim he had figured out they were Round-Up Ready crops after he had tried to destroy them. Monsanto has also come into investigation as to whether or not it's become a monopoly "using gene licenses to keep rival bio-seed technologies off the market."

More recently there has been a problem with Monsanto among farmers in Haiti for their donation of seeds. On June 4th as many as ten thousand Haitians marched to protest Monsanto's gift of seeds to the government. Ac-

ording to the Organic Consumers Association the march was organized by several Haitian rural social movements that "are proposing a development model based on food and seed sovereignty instead of industrial agriculture." The coordinator of the Papaye Peasant Movement (MPP) and a member of La Via Campesina's international coordinating committee states, "there is presently a shortage of seeds in Haiti because many rural families have used their maize seeds to feed refugees." Monsanto claims they were just trying to help and that they are not gaining any revenue from the donation of these seeds. The writer for Monsanto's story on Haiti, G. Young, has even stated in the article that the Haitian farmers will be allowed to save the seeds, and they will not be required to repurchase from Monsanto. Really? Even when Monsanto is currently, and has been in the past, involved in numerous lawsuits and bankruptcies with various farmers across the nation? This report can be viewed at www.centerforfoodsafety.org.

Monsanto is a billion dollar a year industry and the world's largest seed company. They control one fifth of the world's seed market and ninety percent of seed patents from agricultural biotechnology. In the past, farmers have been sued by Monsanto for growing Round-Up Ready crops in their fields, when they might not have even had any idea they had these GM plants on their property.

According to Monsanto's rules, farmers are required to sign an agreement that they will not save the seeds they buy. "More than 275,000 farmers a year buy seeds under these agreements in the United States." However, farmers can acquire these seeds through different means, either by saving the