How Monsanto is Terrifying the Farming World

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by Chris Parker, 7/25/2013 - (edited)

After hearing that GM crops could potentially increase yields, farmers in Schmeiser's region planted fields of Monsanto's seed. Winds pushed pollen from GM canola into Schmeiser's fields, and the plants cross-pollinated. The breed he had been cultivating for 50 years was now contaminated by Monsanto's GM canola.

Did Monsanto apologize? No. It sued Schmeiser for patent infringement - first charging the farmer per acre of contamination, then slapping him with another suit for $1 million and attempting to seize his land and farming equipment. After a seven-year battle, the Canadian Supreme Court eventually ruled against him but let him keep his farm and his $1 million. He was one of the lucky ones.

Schmeiser's case illustrates how Monsanto is dominating and terrifying the agricultural world with secretive technologies, strong-arm tactics, and government approval. According to the Center for Food Safety, Monsanto has filed at least 142 similar lawsuits against farmers for alleged infringement of its patents or abuse of its technology agreement. The company has won 72 judgments totaling almost $24 million.

When lawsuits piled up, putting a crimp in long-term profitability, Monsanto hatched a more lucrative plan. It would attempt to take control of the world's food supply.

This mission started in the mid-'90s, when the company began developing genetically modified crops like soybeans, corn, alfalfa, sugar beets, and wheat (much of it used for livestock feed). Monsanto bred crops that were immune to its leading weed killer, Roundup. That meant farmers no longer had to till the land to kill weeds, as they'd done for hundreds of years.

Monsanto put a wonderful spin on this development: The so-called "No-Till Revolution" promised greater yields, better profits for the family farm, and a heightened ability to feed a growing world.

But there was a dark side. First, farmers grew dependent on Monsanto, having to buy new seed every year, along with Monsanto's pesticides. The effects on human health were largely unknown - would it harm people to consume foods whose genetic profile had suddenly changed after millions of years? What about ripple effects on ecosystems?

Monsanto squeezed out competitors by buying the biggest seed companies. The company bought up the best shelf space and distribution channels.

Seed prices began to soar. Since 1996, the cost of soybeans has increased 325 percent. Corn has risen 259 percent. And the price of genetically modified cotton has jumped a stunning 516 percent.

Instead of feeding the world, Monsanto drove prices through the roof - taking the biggest share for itself. A study by Dr. Charles Benbrook found that rapidly increasing seed and pesticide costs were tamping farmers' income.

Still, Monsanto was doing its best to make them play along. It offered steep discounts to independent dealers willing to restrict themselves to selling mostly Monsanto products. These same contracts brought severe punishment if independents ever sold out to a rival.
U.S. regulators showed little concern for Monsanto's expanding power.

"If you put control over plant and genetic resources into the hands of the private sector... and anybody thinks that plant breeding is still going to be used to solve society's real problems and to advance food security, I have a bridge to sell them," says Dr Benbrook.

It didn't used to be like this. At one time, seed companies were just large-scale farmers who grew various strains for next year's crop. Most of the innovative hybrids and cross-breeding was done the old-fashioned way at public universities. The results were shared publicly.

"It was done in a completely open-sourced way," says Benbrook. "Scientists at the USDA exchanged all sort of seeds with other scientists and researchers all over the world. This free trade and exchange of plant genetic resources was the foundation of progress in plant breeding. And in less than a decade, it was over."

The first crack appeared in 1970, when Congress empowered the USDA to grant exclusive marketing rights to novel strains - with the exception that farmers could replant the seeds if they chose and patented varieties must be provided to researchers.

Corporations wanted more control, and they got it with a landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1980 that allowed the patenting of living organisms. The decision was intended to increase research and innovation. But it did the opposite, encouraging market concentration.

Monsanto would soon gobble up every rival seed company in sight, Syngenta and DuPont both sued, accusing Monsanto of monopolistic practices. But instead of bringing reform, the chemical giants reached settlements that granted them licenses to use, sell, and cross-develop Monsanto products.

It wasn't until 2009 that the Justice Department, working in concert with several state attorneys general, began investigating the company for antitrust violations. But three years later, the feds quietly dropped the case.

Armed with lawyers and private investigators, Monsanto has embarked on a campaign of spying and intimidation to stop any farmer from replanting his seeds. Farmers call them the "seed police." The company's agents fan out into small towns, where they secretly videotape and photograph farmers, store owners, and co-ops; infiltrate community meetings; and gather information from informants. Some Monsanto agents pretend to be surveyors. Others confront farmers on their land and try to pressure them to sign papers giving Monsanto access to their private records.

Monsanto wanted even more leverage. So it turned to Congress.

Earlier this year, a little-noticed provision was slipped into a budget resolution. The measure, pushed by Sen. Blunt, granted the company an unheard-of get-out-of-jail-free card, which critics derisively dubbed "The Monsanto Protection Act."

There have been some indications of adverse health effects, but Monsanto has largely kept its products from researchers. Long-term studies have been limited, but scientists have found greater prevalence of tumors and digestive problems in rats fed GM corn and potatoes, and digestive issues for livestock eating GM feed. Those who have published studies critical of GM have been besieged by industry-funded critics disputing their finding, assailing their professional reputations, and effectively muddying the water.

Monsanto has infiltrated the highest levels of government. U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas is a former Monsanto lawyer, and the company's former and current employees are in high-level posts at the USDA and FDA.

But the real coup came in 2010, Monsanto Vice President Michael Taylor was appointed as the FDA's new deputy commissioner for foods.
Monsanto understood the best way to stave off bad publicity was to suppress independent research. Until recently, when negotiating an agreement with major universities, the company had severely restricted access to its seeds by requiring researchers to apply for a license and get approval from the company about any proposed research. The documentary Scientists Under Attack: Genetic Engineering in the Magnetic Field of Money noted that nearly 95 percent of genetic engineering research is paid for and controlled by corporations like Monsanto.

The FDA approves GM crops by doing no testing of its own but by simply taking Monsanto's word for their safety. So if neither Monsanto nor the feds is ensuring that the food supply is safe, who is? The answer: No one.

A 2009 study by Dr. Doug Gurian-Sherman of Union for Concerned Scientists looked at four Monsanto seeds and found only minimal increases in yield. And since GM crops cost more to produce, their economic benefits are questionable at best. "It's about control of the seed supply."

The use of pesticides has soared as weeds and insects become increasingly resistant to these death sprays. Since GM crops were introduced in 1996, pesticide use has increased by 404 million pounds.

Part of the blame belongs to a monoculture that developed around farming. Farmers know it's better to rotate the crops and pesticides and leave fields fallow for a season. But when corn prices are high, who wants to grow a less profitable crop? The result's been soil degradation, relatively static yields, and an epidemic of weed and insect resistance.

Weeds and insects are fighting back. To kill these adaptive pests, chemical giants like Monsanto and Dow are developing crops capable of withstanding even harsher pesticides. It's producing an endless cycle of greater pesticide use.

In April, biotech companies took another hit when the European Union banned neonicotinoids. Bayer CropScience and Syngenta both make neonics, which are used to coat seeds, protecting crops in their early growth stage. In America, 90 percent of America's corn crop comes with the coating.

The problem is that plants sweat these chemicals out in the morning dew, where they're picked up by bees like a morning cup of Starbucks. Last year, a study linked neonics to the collapse of bee colonies, which threatens the entire food system.

With Monsanto's seeds covering more than 40 percent of America's crop acres (a March study found that 86 percent of corn, 88 percent of cotton, and 93 percent of soybeans grown here are of a GM variety) and Monsanto making an expected $7.65 billion profit this year, it's doubtful the company will go away anytime soon. But as consumers become more aware of the sinister problems lurking in the food chain, activists in many states are pushing for laws that would require foods with GM ingredients to be labeled.

In Florida, state Rep. Rehwinkel-Vasilinda intends to resubmit labeling bills in the next legislative session.
"God gave the seed to the earth and the fruit to the trees," Harvell says. "Notice it didn't say he granted Monsanto a patent."

As more information comes out, it's increasingly clear that GM seed isn't the home run it's portrayed to be. It encourages greater pesticide use, which has a negative impact on the environment and our bodies. Whether or not GM food is safe to eat, it poses a real threat to biodiversity through monopolization of the seed industry and the kind of industrial farming monoculture this inspires.

Meanwhile, a study by the University of Canterbury in England found that non-GM crops in America and Europe are increasing their yields faster than GM crops.

Kansas farmer Bryce Stephens says "I've seen changes since I was little to where it is now. I don't
think it will last. This land and these people here have gone through cycles of boom and bust. We're just in another cycle, and it will be something different."

Providing we don't irreparably break it first.


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