

## Monsanto's Rise to Power

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Monsanto, which considers itself to be an agricultural organization, is one of the largest companies behind genetic engineering. Today they have over twenty products, many of which can be bought from their website, which range from Roundup Ready<sup>TM</sup><sup>1</sup> to genetically modified corn. They claim to “help farmers grow yield sustainably so they can be successful, produce healthier foods, better animal feeds and more fiber, while also reducing agriculture's impact on our environment” (Monsanto U.S. Ag Products), but can they be believed? Their home page, brightly colored, featuring happy farmers and promises to feed the world's hungry, tells the public what they want to hear, while what lies right under the surface of this cheerful appearance is appalling. Monsanto is responsible for the destruction of many farms, the reduction in crop varieties, and the development of resistant weeds and pests. Yet, they continue to push and shove their way across the United States unquestioned, consuming family-owned farms and disrupting the traditions and values that go along with them. Monsanto's growth is fueled by unnecessary sacrifices, unfair and unsupportable convictions, and environmental devastation. Their main focus is to expand and be successful, but in Monsanto's path of destruction lies a number of consequences that we as consumers are forced to face.

Genetically modified organisms (GMOs), introduced in the early 1990s, were created to increase crop productivity and resistance to natural disturbances including harsh conditions and pests. This was done by altering the DNA of plants and inserting new genes from other plants, bacteria, or animals. Although GMOs were introduced with good intentions, the impact has been

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<sup>1</sup> Roundup Ready is a Monsanto product designed for weed resistance and can be used on corn, canola, cotton, or soybean crops (the 4 genetically modified crops in the U.S.). It can be sprayed on plants or it can be already built into the genome of the seeds.

significant and drastic; organic farms are dwindling, species variety is disappearing and unexpected health problems are becoming more common. Today, 8.25 million farmers grow genetically modified crops on about 200 million acres of farmland commercially (Schmidt A527). These staggering numbers do not even take into consideration the farms that have accidentally obtained genetically modified seeds through cross-pollination and through buying unlabeled bags. The source of most of these problems is due to the carelessness of biotech companies<sup>2</sup> such as Monsanto.

Monsanto's rise to power has been dishonest as they continuously develop products without extensive testing; a possibility due to their significant influence on our government. In the past few years, the government has strongly supported GM crops because many of these government workers are former employees of Monsanto. Supreme Court Judge, Clarence Thomas, who is responsible for many of the laws passed for or against genetically modified foods, was a Monsanto attorney before his appointment to his current position (The Future of Food). The U.S. Secretary of Agriculture was a member of the board of directors for Monsanto, and the former U.S. Secretary of Health received a large amount of money from Monsanto in order to support his campaign as Wisconsin Governor (The Future of Food). Monsanto's strong ties in the government allow for the weak regulation of GM products that can be found today. The only requirement for a genetically modified crop is that it "shares equivalent composition and nutritional status to its conventional counterpart" (Schmidt A532). With these relaxed regulations, dangerous genes can easily be spread, but, according to our government; as long as the carrots still contain beta-carotene they are essentially marketable. The government's decision seems irresponsible and unsafe; knowing the cases of cancer and deadly allergic reactions that

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<sup>2</sup> Biotech companies are companies that focus on biotechnology; the science behind genetically modified foods (Zaitlin)

have been caused by these foods, it is incomprehensible to hear that testing is still not required for all of these crops. However, when we take into consideration the effect that Monsanto has on the government, we can begin to understand the reasoning for the lack of regulation. This corruption is terrifying; the products are being regulated by the producers who, concerned only with monetary gains, continue to market products without adequate testing. FDA officials insist that “in the administration's view, the risks posed by transgenic crop breeding aren't great enough to warrant mandatory testing” however, knowing who “the administration” is, makes this statement reasonably distressing (Schmidt A532).

Monsanto is also responsible for the destruction of organic farms and the ruin of farming families across the nation, their weapon: patents. Many farmers have suffered devastating lawsuits for the presence of Monsanto's genetically modified organisms on their property. The reason is a bill that allows Monsanto, among other companies, to patent not only seeds but living organisms. With the help of the government, Monsanto has taken advantage of this immoral bill with an unbelievable “647 biotech plant patents”, and with the patent comes the suit (CFS 11). Today, Monsanto has assembled an army “of 75 employees and set aside an annual budget of \$10 million for the sole purpose of investigating and prosecuting farmers for patent infringement” (CFS 23). After creating new genetically modified seeds or developing new organisms, Monsanto immediately has their “products” patented preventing their use without extensive contracting. These patents have given Monsanto the ability to hire private investigators to test suspected soil on any farm, and, if genes are located, the farmers are sued for the illegal use of their products.

To-date, Monsanto has filed 90 lawsuits against American farmers; and 147 farmers and 39 small businesses or farm companies have had to fight for their lives to avoid paying additional

court costs, attorneys' fees, and in some cases, costs incurred by Monsanto while investigating them. The Center for Food Safety estimates that Monsanto has been awarded over \$15 million for judgments granted in their favour. (Monsanto versus Farmers, ISIS)

However, in most of these court cases, the farmers were unaware of the presence of these genetically modified organisms since no physical differences between the GM products and the organic products were visible. Farmers across the U.S. and Canada are persecuted without substantial reason or reliable evidence, but so far Monsanto remains an unstoppable force.

After prosecution, many farmers have been forced to declare bankruptcy, sign a contract with Monsanto, and destroy their old farms and all of the generations of work that have gone into them. Is all this worth the price of advancement? Percy Schemiser, a victim of the Monsanto attacks, exemplifies the unnecessary disruption that Monsanto has caused. He fought against Monsanto for seven years to try and prove the accusations leveled against him were unfair. He attempted to prove that he was not responsible for the arrival of genetically modified seeds on his property and that he had no need for them. However, he was still found guilty of patent infringement in spite of overwhelming evidence of his innocence (CFS 38). In the end, Monsanto forced Percy Schemiser to pay an enormous sum of money in addition to destroying all of the crops in question. The canola seeds that had been modified organically over generations in his family were all destroyed, and his farm was ruined. Many farmers across America have testified to similar situations, and others that have not destroyed their crops have been forced into contracts, or "technology agreements" which essentially give "Monsanto their right to plant, harvest and sell the GM seed" (Monsanto versus Farmers, ISIS). These "agreements" then leave the farmers "vulnerable to harassment such as having their property investigated, litigations and out of court settlements" if they try to use any product outside of the Monsanto company

(Monsanto versus Farmers, ISIS). With these contracts, farmers are forced to settle legal problems in Monsanto's hometown; with home-court advantage, this corporation almost never fails. What Monsanto subjects its farmers to is unfair and once again demonstrates the hypocrisy of their claims; the need for power and money trumps helping local farmers and protecting consumers.

Monsanto has not only affected the farmers; the extreme overuse of their products, due to the amount of land they now control, is harming the environment as well. Some of the most popular farming products produced by Monsanto are herbicides and insect repellants. However, since their introduction, herbicide use has increased by a shocking 138 million pounds (CFS 8). To decrease this risky number, Monsanto began incorporating genes from the bacteria *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) into plants so that the plants themselves can produce the toxins to kill predators (Pinholster 639). Unfortunately, researchers have recently found that many of these toxins not only kill pests but also butterflies, beetles, and other insects that are helpful to the growth of these crops. This has a huge impact on the environment; the death of these species can severely damage ecosystems, and if GM crops continue to expand as rapidly as they are, this can lead to the potential extinction of some organisms. Similar to the effects on insects, crops are suffering. After the first successful herbicide-resistant crop was introduced in 1996, Monsanto quickly put their products on the market. Today, out of the four GM food crops in the U.S. and Canada (soy, cotton, corn and canola), Monsanto is responsible for the unspeakably high percentages that are modified. In 2004, 85% of all U.S. soy crops, 45% of all U.S. corn crops, 75% of all U.S. cotton crops, and 85% of all U.S. canola crops were genetically modified (CFS 10). These numbers are frightening because all of these plants can be easily destroyed and our source of food wiped out. Without the variety brought on through natural selection, these clones

have exactly the same genome. Because of this, one environmental disaster, such as a new fungal introduction, has the power to destroy every single one of those plants. Organic crops bring genetic differences so that some plants are resistant to certain disasters. From there, although many will still be destroyed, those few remaining have the power to reproduce, and crops will not be lost. GM plants lack this diversity, and if they continue to grow, the risk of loss rises with them.

Since 1980, when the biotechnology revolution began, Monsanto has invested over \$800 million in genetic engineering. Three hundred million dollars went into the development of one hormone, and in 2005 alone, \$430 million was spent on seed research and development (Kleinman 429). This unbelievably large sum of money seems morally wrong when we realize that in 2005 only \$266.1 million was spent on lung cancer research and in 2007 this number dropped to \$261.9 million (Cancer Research Funding, NCI). The amount of money that Monsanto spent in the same year is almost double the amount spent on cancer research. To add to this, Monsanto executives believe that all this money is negligible, as they calculate nearly a billion dollars a year for sales by 2010 (Kleinman 429). The money that they have used to develop genes that most consumers and companies now refuse to sell or buy, seems implausible when looking at the number of dangerous medical conditions that are continuously taking lives. Once again, Monsanto's greed and desire for power and money trumps the "better good" and we consumers need to realize that this revolution is nothing short of dangerous. The rate at which Monsanto is growing is only allowing them to completely monopolize the farming industry. They now have the power to destroy organic farms forcing farmers to use and annually buy genetically modified seeds. They have also gained control in the government that allows them to develop more products unrestrained by regulation. Monsanto's irresponsible actions are currently

contributing to the significant damage of our environment and new, severe health problems.

In today's fast paced society, people are always looking for the next technological advancement. However, it is important to note that not every step we take is a beneficial step forward. In some cases it is necessary to look at the effects of "the next best thing" and evaluate the situation more completely. For genetically modified foods, when looking at Monsanto and all of the consequences that follow its oppressive expansion, there is a legitimate call for concern. If left unchecked, Monsanto will continue to gain more and more power, and we as consumers will pay the ultimate price - our health and our future.

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