

Genetically Engineered Food and the Right to Know: What's Hidden Beneath the GMO Label?

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Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#)

Rachel Parent's campaign ([Kids Right To Know](#)) on GMO labelling has been the [subject of a GM industry strategy](#) aimed at countering her message. Despite this, in January 2016, Rachel Parent managed to get an invite to Monsanto's annual shareholders' meeting in St Louis ([listen from 31:45](#)). From the floor, she had the opportunity to address Monsanto CEO Hugh Grant directly and began by saying:

One of your statements in your public report is that your success depends on public acceptance of your products. How do you expect the public to accept your GM crops if you make every effort to hide them?

Parent offered the example of computer manufacturers providing the 'intel inside' label on their products because they are proud of their technology. She went on to state:

If you truly believe that your technology is safe, if you truly believe that it has the potential to feed the world, then why are you treating it like a dirty little secret that can't be shown on the label? Why, if it's such a proven technology, are you fighting it [labelling] instead of promoting it? 64 countries around the world already require mandatory GMO labelling

She gave the example of Campbell's deciding to label GM ingredients on its product to promote transparency in response to consumer demand and continued:

Even the New England Journal of Medicine in a recent post supported labelling and stated that it was essential for tracking novel food allergies and ... [inaudible] effects of chemical herbicides applied to GM crops. Today, more than 70 bills have been introduced in over 30 states to require GMO labelling.

Parent added that labelling bills were narrowly defeated in some other states as over \$100 million was spent in misleading advertising campaigns, of which Monsanto was a major contributor:

Fortunately, you weren't able to mislead the people of Vermont, which now has a law that will go into effect July this year. So, instead, you tried to sue them. You spent millions every year lobbying politicians to prevent GMO labelling laws from coming into effect, including bills HR 1599, dubbed 'the Dark Act', aka 'deny Americans the right to know'. You've spent millions on deceiving and misleading advertising, you've spent untold amounts paying so-called 'independent scientists', like Kevin Folta, to discredit people such as myself.

Parent finished her three-minute slot by saying:

The GMO labelling movement is growing and it's not going to stop. Mr Grant, will you commit to stop wasting tens of their money – the shareholders' money – on opposing consumers' right to know? Will you commit to stop fighting transparency and freedom of choice? And will you commit to stop fighting democracy?

In response, Hugh Grant argued that Monsanto has been in favour of voluntary labelling for many years and said Monsanto applauded Cheerio's and Campbell's for exerting their right to label GM (despite the industry spending millions to defeat such action). He continued by saying that Monsanto hoped some kind of federal voluntary labelling standard agreement could be reached that applies across the US (note the word 'voluntary').

According to Grant, Monsanto's concern has been about the emergence of state by state labels which results in a patchwork approach, whereby it becomes difficult to know what is in food and moving food from state to state becomes complicated. Grant said he hoped and expected this would be taken up by the FDA.

That is very convenient seeing how the [revolving door](#) between Monsanto and the FDA operates. Monsanto can control the labelling issue better at federal state level. When individual states begin to pass regulations requiring labelling, or for that matter when anything has the potential to harm profits, the industry has access to considerable influence (see [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#)) at the centre.

The anti-labelling stance is portrayed as being carried out with benign intent, of course: to prevent cross-state to state movement of food becoming difficult, or, as USDA Secretary and ardent [Monsanto supporter](#) Tom Vilsack implied, to prevent consumers from becoming confused (as labelling GM food would "[send out the wrong impression](#)").

Time for a reality check. The CEO of a corporation has a legal obligation to maximise profit and market share. If the CEO doesn't do it decides to do something that will benefit the population and not increase profit, he or she is not going to be CEO for long. They'll be replaced by somebody who does do it. The bottom line is sales and profit maximisation. Profit trumps any notion of public good.

In 2014, Bloomberg ran [a piece](#) about Monsanto which stated that Hugh Grant is focused on selling more genetically modified seeds in Latin America to drive earnings growth outside the core US market. Sales of soybean seeds and genetic licenses climbed 16 percent, and revenue in the unit that makes glyphosate weed killer, sold as Roundup, rose 24 percent.

There is immense pressure to deliver profits regardless of [the damage](#) being done in Latin America and regardless of how much harm glyphosate is doing across the world or how carcinogenic it is and how much [Monsanto knows it is](#).

Rachel Parent says Monsanto has spent millions on preventing GMO labelling and adds that this is a waste of shareholders' money. However, given the commercial obligations of Hugh Grant as CEO, it must be assumed that this is not so much a 'waste' but an investment based on a careful calculation that more money would be lost to the company if labelling were to occur: consumers would then reject GM food in droves.

In response to Parent, Grant also stated that in 40 years' time there would be two billion more people on the planet and it is going to be warmer, dustier and drier. He argued we would have to produce twice as much food and implied we should therefore not discount GM from having a role to play.

No doubt the implication is that we should let the [bogus 'free' market](#) decide on mix of options, despite GM itself being a [flawed option](#). Given the financial and political clout transnational agribusiness companies wield, it would not be too long before GM became the overwhelming dominant option – regardless of what people actually desire: the industry has captured or at the very least seriously subverted or compromised governments and key policy and regulatory bodies in [the US](#), [Europe](#), [India](#) and, in fact, on a [global level](#). Unfortunately, bribery, faking, smearing and the corruption of science have [become commonplace](#).

At the same time, the industry employs self-serving rhetoric about 'feeding the world', while paying scant attention to the [actual evidence](#) pertaining the reasons why we have persistent poverty, food insecurity and hunger. And it offers its GMOs as a techno quick-fix solution to problems which it had a hand in making and benefits from.

Mandatory labelling would be a good idea. People should know what they are eating, But GMO has a serious credibility problem. No amount of labelling can hide that.

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