

# “Nobel of Agriculture”, World Food Prize. And the Winner is ... Monsanto

Marc Van Montagu, Mary-Dell Chilton and Robert Fraley, pioneers in biotechnology and GMO crops

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Though not nearly as high profile, the annual World Food Prize award is often referred to as the “Nobel Prize” for agriculture, and this year’s winners – scientists with key roles in developing genetically engineered crops – may bring unwanted attention.

On Wednesday, the winners of the World Food Prize were announced at the US State Department, with Secretary of State John Kerry in attendance. This year’s award will be shared among three scientists: Marc Van Montagu, Mary-Dell Chilton and Robert Fraley, all pioneers in agricultural biotechnology.

Fraley is currently the chief technology officer at biotech giant Monsanto, while Mary-Dell Chilton is the founder of Syngenta Biotechnology, another prominent biotech company. In awarding the prize, which comes along with a \$250,000 cash award, the Iowa-based World Food Prize Foundation reasons that genetically modified crops offer higher yields, and are more resilient to pestilence and adverse weather.

*“These three scientists are being recognized for their independent, individual breakthrough achievements in founding, developing and applying modern agricultural biotechnology,”* said Kenneth Quinn, president of the World Food Prize Foundation.

Though genetically modified foods are generally accepted within the US, as evidenced by the GMO varieties of soybeans and corn popular among US farmers, they are not approved for cultivation in Europe, and their introduction into other markets, such as India and China, has been limited. Countries in Europe such as Hungary have gone as far as destroying entire shipments of seed found to be genetically modified.

Likewise, there is a vibrant number of consumer groups in the US that strongly advocate against the introduction of other GMO crops such as wheat for direct human consumption (as opposed to use in animal feed) and also advocate for GMO food labeling.

Van Montagu, founder of the Institute of Plant Technology Outreach at Ghent University in Belgium, has said he hoped *“that this recognition will pave the way for Europe to embrace the benefits of this technology, an essential condition for global acceptance of transgenic plants.”*



A woman holds up a poster during a protest against U.S.-based Monsanto Co. and genetically modified organisms (GMO), in New York May 25, 2013. (Reuters / Eduardo Munoz)

The World Food Prize Foundation, a nonprofit organization that was founded in 1986 at the behest of Nobel Peace Prize winner Norman Borlaug, honored for his role in the “*green revolution*,” has been criticized in the past for its close ties to agribusiness.

If nothing else, a look back at the past winners of the prize seems to indicate the organization’s emphasis on technology, and the potential to alleviate mass hunger and increase crop yields.

Last year’s winner of the World Food Prize was Daniel Hillel, who pioneered food production in the Middle East with a radically new method of delivering water to crops in arid regions known as “micro-irrigation.” In the previous two years, the organization honored NGOs and political leaders that worked to alleviate hunger.

Regardless, this year’s inclusion of scientists with deep roots in the biotech field is sure not to sit well with opponents of GMO crops. Though genetically modified seeds are hailed as a solution to alleviate hunger and increase crop yields, critics worry about the legal repercussions of corporate control over food sources, as well as the loss of biodiversity and potential impact on the environment.

More controversial is whether GMO foods may produce adverse health effects by human consumption. Critics of genetically modified plants point to the possibility of transferring antibiotic resistance, or the creation of allergens that might impact both humans and animals.

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