

The Growing Global Challenge to Monsanto's Monopolistic Greed

By [Kevin Zeese](#) and [Margaret Flowers](#)

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 (Photo: Monsanto via The New York Times)

The common problem we face is the power of concentrated wealth and monopolistic corporate interests. This has created a crony capitalist economy that uses government to further enrich the wealthy at the expense of the people, often threatening our basic necessities for life. A clear example of this is found in the behavior of the chemical and seed corporation, Monsanto.

Monsanto threatens the world's food supply; this is a major challenge of our era. This struggle is central to the global ecosystem, economy and energy crises. Monsanto also pushes poisonous chemicals into the environment and promotes agricultural practices that exacerbate climate change.

Monsanto's actions truly affect each of us. They put their profits over the need for healthy foods, diverse seed supplies and the stability of the agricultural economy. They employ a variety of tools to control access to seeds and aggressively push genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and toxic chemicals despite serious safety concerns about them. And they accomplish this with great help from the US government.

When President Obama appointed a Monsanto lobbyist, Michael Taylor, as the "food czar" (officially the deputy commissioner for foods) – avoiding the Senate confirmation process, which would have brought public attention to the appointment – it was one more example of how corrupted both parties have become by corporate influence.

A global grassroots movement is building to challenge Monsanto as more people realize that we are in a struggle for our survival. May 25 is a [global day of action against Monsanto](#) taking place in hundreds of cities and 41 countries. Monsanto must be stopped before its unfettered greed destroys our health and environment. We urge you to join the effort to stop Monsanto.

Monsanto: A Threat to Public Health and the Environment

Monsanto's products increase the use of fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, water and energy. At a time when the world needs to be making a transition away from the destructive impacts of energy and chemical-intensive agriculture toward local and organic food and farming, Monsanto is pulling the world in the opposite direction.

Monsanto [began as a chemical company](#) in 1901. In the 1930s, it was responsible for some of the most damaging chemicals in our history – polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCB's, and

dioxin. According to a [Food & Water Watch corporate profile](#), a single Monsanto plant in Sauget, Illinois, produced 99 percent of PCB's until they were banned in 1976. PCBs are carcinogenic and harmful to multiple organs and systems. They are still illegally dumped into waterways, where they accumulate in plants and food crops, as well as fish and other aquatic organisms, which enter the human food supply. The Sauget plant is now the home of two Superfund sites.

Dioxin is [the defoliant used in Vietnam known as Agent Orange](#). It is one of the most dangerous chemicals known, a highly toxic carcinogen linked to 50 illnesses and 20 birth defects. Between 1962 and 1971, 19 million gallons of Agent Orange were sprayed in Vietnam. A class action lawsuit filed by Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange was settled for \$180 million. And a Monsanto plant that made dioxin in Times Beach, Missouri, poisoned the area so greatly that the town has been wiped from the map. Thousands of people had to be relocated and it is now also a superfund site. Consistent with their method of operation, Monsanto has denied responsibility for the harm these chemicals have caused.

Their biggest selling chemical worldwide is the herbicide glyphosate, sold under the name Roundup. Monsanto markets it as a safe herbicide and has made a fortune from it. Sales of [Roundup and other glyphosate-based herbicides accounted for 27 percent of Monsanto's total 2011 net sales](#). Monsanto engineers genetically modified seeds, branded as "Roundup Ready," to resist Roundup so that the herbicide is absolutely necessary for those who buy these seeds. Roundup Ready seeds have been Monsanto's most successful genetically modified product line and have made Roundup the most widely used herbicide in the history of the world.

[Roundup is toxic](#), known to cause cancer, Parkinson's Disease, [birth defects](#) and infertility. A [2012 European Report](#) found that the, "Industry has known from its own studies since the 1980s that glyphosate causes malformations in experimental animals at high doses" and that industry has known "since 1993 that these effects also occur at lower and mid doses." This information was not made public, and both Monsanto and the European government misled people by telling them glyphosate was safe – as did the US government.

In response to [Monsanto's denial of this toxicity](#), Earth Open Source explicitly pointed to studies, including some funded by Monsanto, that showed "glyphosate causes birth defects in experimental animals" and also causes "cancer, genetic damage, endocrine disruption and other serious health effects. Many of these effects are found at very low, physiologically relevant doses."

Before the use of glyphosate-resistant seeds, farmers used lower quantities of Roundup for fear of killing their own plants (since the herbicide kills anything green). But, [a 2012 report found](#) that with resistant seeds, "the herbicide can be sprayed in massive amounts, often from planes, near homes, schools and villages, resulting in massive increases in cancer and birth defects."

In addition, farmers are discovering [Roundup resistant "super weeds"](#) that are not killed by the herbicide. An [Arkansas farmer tells US News](#) "This is not a science fiction thing, this is happening right now. We're creating super weeds." Indeed, there are [now 24 Roundup resistant weeds](#) that have been reported. In response to the appearance of these weeds, [a report found](#): "farmers ... use progressively more glyphosate as well as mixtures of other even more toxic herbicides." In fact, farmers who grow genetically modified crops use about 25 percent more herbicides than farmers who use traditional seeds.

Monsanto produces a variety of pesticides that are less well known. [Author Jill Richardson reports](#) that these include “a number of chemicals named as Bad Actors by Pesticide Action Network.” They include known carcinogens, endocrine disruptors and other toxins such as Alachlor, Acetochlor, Atrazine, Clopyralid, Dicamba and Thiodicarb.

Not only does Monsanto never take responsibility for the impact of its poisonous chemicals, but they do their best to prevent research showing toxic effects. For example, in 2011, [Monsanto acquired Beeologics](#), a company dedicated to restoring the health of the bee population, amid scientific and media speculation that an overuse of pesticides was to blame for dwindling bee populations.

Monsanto also threatens the sustainability of agriculture because its products require the use of larger quantities of water and fossil fuels in farming. While genetically engineered crops are supposed to be more drought resistant, the opposite turns out to be true. [Don Huber](#), a science expert, notes “It takes *twice as much water* to produce a pound of a Roundup-ready crop soybean plant treated with glyphosate, as it does with soybean plant that’s not treated with glyphosate.”

Monsanto is a major threat to climate change due to its energy-intensive agricultural model and promotion of ethanol as a fuel source. The [Organic Consumers Association adds it all up](#): “All told, the production and processing of Monsanto’s GMO crops, from deforestation to fossil-fuel-based pesticides and fertilizers, polluting factory farms, and fuel-intensive food processing and distribution, is estimated to produce up to 51% of global greenhouse gas emissions.”

As a result of Monsanto’s marketing, there are a lot of [myths about GMOs](#). The truth is that GMO foods are different from traditional foods and are neither more nutritious – nor have they been proven to be safe to eat. Limited [studies](#) so far indicate that GMO foods may cause kidney and liver damage. GMO crops [do not produce larger crop yields](#) or make farmers’ lives easier, nor are they a key to feeding the world. The use of GMO seeds does environmental damage by increasing the use of pesticides, fossil fuels and water. And they make the world’s biggest environmental problem, climate change, worse.

Monsanto: A Threat to Biodiversity and Independent Agriculture

One of the keys to sustainability and durability in times of environmental stress is biodiversity. This means the existence of many varieties of plants and the insects, fungi and bacteria they require for survival so that food can be produced under different conditions. With climate change upon us, the environment is in a state of great stress: more extreme weather, new varieties of insects moving from south to north and new weeds are becoming common. This is a time when biodiversity is more important than ever.

Yet years of chemical-based agriculture have poisoned the air, water, soil and food supplies, which has killed many living things and decreased biodiversity. In addition to causing disease in humans, the use of herbicides and pesticides is contributing to a [rapid species extinction](#) of beneficial plants, insects and animals.

Monsanto is pushing agriculture toward less biodiversity by concentrating the world’s seed supply under its control. Through promotion of their genetically altered crops, contamination of traditional seeds and the practice of monopolization, Monsanto is rapidly dominating our global food system.

Monsanto's genes are currently found in 40 percent of the crops grown in the United States. A [March 2013 report found](#) 86 percent of corn, 88 percent of cotton and 93 percent of soybeans farmed in the US are now genetically engineered (GE) varieties, making the option of farming non-GE crops increasingly difficult. As GE crops spread and infect or mix with traditional crops, it is becoming harder to preserve traditional seeds. This creates a great problem because, as we discussed above, [GE crops are unsustainable](#) for a variety of reasons.

Monsanto's efforts to dominate the market began with buying up the competition as early as 1982. In the decade after the mid-90s, [Monsanto spent more than \\$12 billion to buy at least 30](#) businesses contributing to the decline of [independent seed companies](#). One of the big purchases that consolidated the market was a [1997 purchase of Holden Foundation Seeds](#) and two Holden seed distributors for \$1.02 billion. Holden was the country's last big independent producer of foundation seed. The company was in the Holden family for three generations. They produced seed that was planted on about 35 percent of the acreage set aside for corn and were the biggest American producer of foundation corn, the parent seed from which hybrids are made.

[Jill Richardson describes](#) how aggressively Monsanto uses their market power "to get seed dealers to not stock many of their competitors' products ... they restrict the seed companies' ability to combine Monsanto's traits with those of their competitors. And, famously, farmers who plant Monsanto's patented seeds sign contracts prohibiting them from saving and replanting their seeds." They [promised rebates](#) to farmers who ensured that Monsanto products made up at least 70 percent of their inventory to keep competitors out of the market. As a result of this, through either purchases or forcing competitors into bankruptcy, [the number of independent seed producers has dropped](#) from 300 to under 100 since the mid-90s. Monsanto [also required](#) that their Roundup Ready seeds be used only with Roundup, thereby keeping generic, less expensive competitors out of the market.

The result has been increased prices for farmers and consumers. Since 2001, Monsanto has [more than doubled](#) the price of soybean and corn seeds and farmers have been told to expect prices to keep increasing. According to a [March 2013 report](#), from 1995 to 2011, the average cost to plant one acre of soybeans has risen 325 percent; cotton prices spiked 516 percent and corn seed prices are up by 259 percent. The rising cost has had a deadly effect in India, where [more than 270,000 farmers](#) who grew Monsanto's Bt Cotton committed suicide, many by drinking pesticides, because of endless growing debt. Nonetheless, the greatest threat from the [loss of biodiversity in the seed markets](#) is the ability to adapt to increasingly unpredictable climate changes. As [Salon reports](#): "Many of the seed breeders and retailers Monsanto purchased were regional experts, familiar with the soil and adept at breeding crops suited to the vagaries of local pests and climate. That sprawling network of local knowledge and experimentation has been severely thinned." Richardson adds, when crops are "too genetically homogenous, then they are vulnerable to a single disease or pest that can wipe them out."

A March 2013 report, [Seed Giants vs. US Farmers](#), found that Monsanto's seed dominance is also shrinking the number of independent farmers. According to the report, as of January 2013, Monsanto, alleging seed patent infringement, had filed 144 lawsuits involving 410 farmers and 56 small farm businesses in at least 27 different states. Some of these farmers are sued because pollen brings Monsanto products onto their farms. There are so many cases it is impossible to summarize them in this article, but the [Organic Consumers Association has an excellent web site](#) for more information on this and other Monsanto

controversies.

Monsanto: Leading Example of Corrupted Government Unable to Operate in the Public Interest

You would think this concentration of industry would lead to antitrust litigation. In fact, shortly after taking office, the Obama administration began an antitrust investigation, taking over from several states that were looking into the market practices of Monsanto. The investigation was announced with much fanfare, but last November, [without even a press release, the Department of Justice closed the investigation](#), leaving us to conclude that it may have been a tactic to thwart state efforts.

At the beginning of the antitrust investigation, there was hope that a marketplace with more diverse seed sources and competition could exist in the future, but with the Obama administration's decision to drop the investigation, Monsanto domination of the market has been given the imprimatur of legality and the abusive practices Monsanto uses to buy or destroy competition have been ratified.

Monsanto exemplifies political connections, the revolving door, bought-and-paid-for corporatist governance and so much that is wrong with the way the US government operates. [Open Secrets reports](#) Monsanto is one of the biggest spenders in Washington. It [spent \\$6 million lobbying in DC in 2012](#), the biggest agribusiness spender. The next was Archer Daniel Midlands, spending just over \$1 million.

Monsanto epitomizes the revolving door between industry and government. [At least seven Monsanto officials](#) have served in government positions. Michael [Taylor left the Food and Drug Administration \(FDA\) in 1984](#) to join King & Spalding, a law firm that lobbies for Monsanto. He returned to the FDA in 1991 and then left again to return to Monsanto in 1994 as their vice president for public policy, only to return to the FDA again as the current "food czar," where he has led major advances for genetically modified foods. Taylor played the lead role in introducing rBGH (bovine growth hormone), which was used to increase cows' milk production, into the US market in the early 90s along [with two other Monsanto-FDA door revolvers](#), Dr. Margaret Miller and Susan Sechen, both from the Office of New Animal Drugs.

[Other door revolvers](#) include high level officials: Arthur Hayes, commissioner of the FDA from 1981 to 1983 and consultant to Searle's public relations firm, which later merged with Monsanto; Michael A. Friedman, former acting commissioner of the FDA, who later went on to become senior vice president for clinical affairs at Searle; and Virginia Weldon, a member of the FDA's Endocrinologic and Metabolic Drugs Advisory Committee, after retiring as vice president for public policy at Monsanto.

It is not only the FDA where the Monsanto revolving door has influence. On the Supreme Court, Justice [Clarence Thomas used to be a lawyer for Monsanto](#). Recently, [the Supreme Court ruled against a farmer who was sued by Monsanto](#), ordering the farmer to pay \$84,000 in damages.

But it is not only the revolving door that is the problem. It is also that some top government officials "work" for Monsanto while they are in office. One example took place during the Clinton administration [when the French government was reluctant to allow Monsanto's seeds on French soil](#). First the US Trade Representative Charlene Barschewsky urged the

French government to allow the seeds. When that did not work, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright lobbied for Monsanto in France. When that failed, President Clinton himself took up the task of giving Prime Minister Lionel Jospin “an earful” about Monsanto. Even that did not work. Finally, Vice President Gore pushed Jospin – who finally gave in.

This is just one example of many in which the US government foreign policy apparatus operated on behalf of Monsanto. [Five years of WikiLeaks diplomatic cables](#) during the Bush and Obama administrations reveal that the State Department lobbied for Monsanto products worldwide and pushed genetically modified foods wherever it could. It is almost like the [US government is a marketing arm for Monsanto](#) and genetically modified foods. Indeed, in August 2011, WikiLeaks exposed that American diplomats requested funding to send lobbyists for the biotech industry to hold talks with politicians and agricultural officials in “target countries” in areas like Africa and Latin America.

There is no doubt that in the new massive trade agreements, the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the trade agreement being negotiated with Europe, the United States will seek to include protections for Monsanto and GMOs. [Europeans involved in every aspect](#) of agriculture or food safety are very concerned that lowered trade barriers will allow GMOs into Europe. In Europe, GMOs are currently grown on less than 1 percent of farmland.

When people try to use democratic tools to change Monsanto’s behavior, Monsanto and its allies spend millions to confuse voters and create fear. That was clear in [the California initiative in November 2012 in which tens of millions were spent](#) to prevent the requirement that foods be labeled so consumers would know whether they contained GMOs or not. Consumer groups continue to push for labeling. Another vote will be held in 2013 in Washington State, and Vermont may become the first state to pass a law requiring labeling.

Although labeling of foods that contain GMOs is required in Europe and US corporations such as Walmart and McDonald’s comply with these rules in Europe, Monsanto and its allies are taking the fight to prevent labeling in the United States to new levels. As more state-level battles and an energized grass roots develop, [Ronnie Cummins of the Organic Consumers Association reports](#) Monsanto and allies are trying to subvert these efforts by getting the corrupt federal government to pass a law forbidding states to pass labeling laws.

Impossible, you think? Well, Monsanto has done the seemingly impossible before. Most recently, one legislative victory that enraged people was the [Monsanto Protection Act](#) (actually misleadingly named the Farmer Assurance Provision) which was buried in a spending bill earlier this year and which protects Monsanto from the courts. For example, under the new law, federal courts are not allowed to stop the sale or planting of controversial genetically modified seeds, no matter what health issues may arise concerning GMOs in the future. There are now [efforts to add a rider to the farm bill to repeal](#) this measure.

Stopping Monsanto and Moving to Sensible Agricultural Policy

The first step to stopping the entrenchment of genetically modified foods in our food supply is labeling. As noted above, states are moving forward on that front, despite the efforts of Monsanto to stop them. This is the big battle because when foods are labeled, consumers have the power of knowledge and can choose not to buy them. [Cummins reports](#) that in Europe, the labeling of foods was the key to stopping the development of genetically modified foods.

One of the tools we must use is the boycott. Large food and beverage corporations that sell billions of dollars of [organic and natural foods bankrolled the industry opposition](#) to GMO labeling in California. Brand names like Kashi, Cascadian Farms, Bear Naked, Honest Tea, Odwalla, Naked Juice and others need to be told that we will not buy their products if they continue to fund ignorance by blocking GMO labeling.

To protect our food and health, the United States needs to adopt [the precautionary principle](#), which means products must be proven to be safe before they are allowed on the market. The [US applies a sham standard of “substantial equivalence”](#) which avoids the need to test for safety. Applying the precautionary principle to Monsanto’s products would mean a moratorium on them until their safety can be demonstrated by independent (non-corporate-funded), long-term tests for food safety as well as safety for agriculture. Our health should come before Monsanto’s profits.

People need to be empowered not just with credible information about genetically modified foods and how to avoid them – that is, buy organic and non-processed foods – but also with access to courts to sue if agriculture, the environment or their health is damaged by GMOs. The repeal of the “Monsanto Protection Act” is a first step in that direction, but people also need to have a greater ability to sue corporations that harm them.

We advocate a two-path approach – protest what you do not like and build what you want. That means that while we encourage community-supported agriculture, organic and local gardening, preparing your own non-processed foods and working to change laws, we also urge protest. This May 25 nearly 300 protests are being held all over the world against Monsanto in the [March Against Monsanto](#) organized by [Occupy Monsanto](#). Join these protests.

As it is with many other issues, the future of the world’s food supply boils down to the people vs. concentrated wealth and corporate power. It highlights the corruption of government and the need for a real democracy in which people are allowed to make choices for themselves on basic issues like what kind of food they eat and what kind of plants they want to grow. Popular resistance to concentrated wealth is growing as more people demand the right to control their own lives.

You can learn more and hear our interview with Ronnie Cummins, Patty Lovera and Adam Eiding, “Reasons to Protest Monsanto” at [Clearing The FOG](#).

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Kevin Zeese JD and Margaret Flowers MD co-host [ClearingtheFOGRadio.org](#) on We Act Radio 1480 AM Washington, DC and on Economic Democracy Media, co-direct [It’s Our Economy](#) and are organizers of the [Occupation of Washington, DC](#). Their twitters are @KBZeese and @MFlowers8.

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