



Monsanto: The evil corporation in your refrigerator

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When we consider the rogue's gallery of devilish, over-sized, greedy and disproportionately powerful corporations, we generally come up with outfits like Microsoft, **Bechtel**, AIG, Halliburton, Goldman-Sachs, Exxon-Mobil and the United States Senate. Yet somehow, Monsanto, arguably the *most* devilish, over-sized, greedy and disproportionately powerful corporation in the world has been able to more or less skulk between the raindrops -- only a household name in households where documentaries like **Food Inc.** are regarded as light Friday evening entertainment. My house, for example. But for the most part, if you were to ask an average American for their list of sinister corporations, Monsanto probably wouldn't make the cut.

It should.

Founded by Missouri pharmacist John Francis Queeny in 1901, Monsanto is literally everywhere. Just about every non-organic food product available to consumers has some sort of connection with Monsanto.

Anyone who can read a label knows that corn, soy and cotton can be found in just about every American food product. Upwards of 90% of all corn, soybeans and cotton are grown from genetically engineered seeds, also known as genetically modified organisms (GMOs). These genetically enhanced products appear in around 70% of all American processed food products. And Monsanto controls 90% of all genetically engineered seeds. In other words, Monsanto controls -- and owns patents on -- most of the American food supply.

When you consider, **as Walleepop originally reported**, that one-in-four food labels is inaccurate, that the F.D.A.'s testing is weak at best, then how can we trust one corporation to have so much control over our produce? The answer is, we can't.

Recently, **a study by the International Journal of Biological Sciences** revealed that Monsanto's Mon 863, Mon 810, and Roundup herbicide-absorbing NK 603 in corn caused kidney and liver damage in laboratory rats. Scientists also discovered damage to the heart, spleen, adrenal glands and even the blood of rats that consumed the mutant corn. A "state of hepatorenal toxicity" the study concluded.

This hasn't slowed down Monsanto's profit machine. In 2008, Monsanto cleared over \$2 billion in net profits on \$11 billion in revenues. And its 2009 is looking equally as excellent.

Author and food safety advocate **Robyn O'Brien** told me, "Monsanto is expecting gross margins in Q2 2010 of 62%, its corn and soy price mix to be up 8-10% and its glyphosate revenue to expand to an estimated \$1 billion in gross profit by 2012, enabling Monsanto to further drive R&D into seeds and to price those seeds at a premium -- further driving price increases on the farm and in the grocery stores."

This, **O'Brien says**, in the same year when farm income declined by around 34%.

Because Monsanto claims that its GMOs create higher yields and therefore comparatively higher revenues per acre for struggling American farmers, they're certainly a tempting option. On the surface, that is. Monsanto controls its seeds with an iron fist, so even if you happen to own a farm next to another farm upon which Monsanto seeds are used, and if those seeds migrate onto your land, Monsanto can **sue you for royalties**.

Additionally, if you use seeds from crops grown from Monsanto seeds, a process known as "seed cleaning," you also have to pay royalties to Monsanto or it will sue you. All told, Monsanto has recovered \$15 million in royalties by suing farmers, with individual settlements ranging from five figures to millions of dollars each.

Back in 2004, farmer Kem Ralph **served eight months in jail** and was fined \$1.3 million for lying about Monsanto cotton seeds he was hiding in his barn as a favor to a friend. They weren't even *his seeds* (yeah, that's what they all say!). By way of comparison, the fine in Ralph's home state of Tennessee for, say, cocaine possession, is \$2,500.

In keeping with the Orwellian nature of modern marketing, one of the first phrases you see on the front page of the **Monsanto website** is "we help farmers." Funny. In a cruelly ironical way, that is.

In fairness, the argument in support of Monsanto is generally "it makes more food for lower prices." Of course this is a red herring. Basic economics proves that choice and competition create lower prices. Not monopolies. This applies not only to American grocery stores, but also in terms of feeding developing nations where food is scarcer. Moreover, stronger Monsanto herbicides, compatible with herbicide resistant seeds, are giving rise to **mutant Wolverine-ish super weeds that have adapted** and are rapidly spreading through the air to farms that don't use Monsanto GMOs, destroying obviously vulnerable crops. Say nothing of the inevitable mutant bugs that will adapt to the pesticides that are implanted into the Monsanto Mon 810 genetic code. And if further studies indicate similar organ damage in humans, the externalized costs to health care systems will begin to seriously out-weigh the benefits of cheaper food.

Ultimately, there are better, healthier ways to make cheaper food. Until then the best thing we can do is to demand further investigations and buy organic products whenever practical.

And if you can't afford to buy organic, O'Brien recommends, "A great first step, given how pervasive these ingredients are in processed foods that often use these ingredients to extend shelf life, is to reduce your exposure to processed foods and stick with pronounceable ingredients and foods that your grandmother would have served her kids."

Meanwhile, let's endeavor to make Monsanto a household name. But not in a good way.

On January 15, **the Obama Justice Department launched an anti-trust investigation** against the corporate behemoth over its next generation of genetically modified "Roundup Ready" soybean seeds. The very next day, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to hear the case **Monsanto v. Geertson Seed Farms**, which challenges the safety of genetically modified agricultural products -- the centerpiece of the Monsanto empire. If the investigation fails, farmers will have to switch over to the next generation of Roundup Ready seeds in 2014. And the cycle of corporate abuse and monopolization will continue.

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