

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#639 - Genetically Altering The World's Food

February 24, 1999

On January 14, after an 8-year scientific review, Canada rejected Monsanto corporation's request for approval of its genetically altered milk hormone, rBGH, a drug that makes dairy cows produce 10% more milk than normal.[1] This was a serious setback for Monsanto because rBGH was the company's first genetically-engineered product and Monsanto had hoped international acceptance of rBGH would smoothe the way for its other genetically-engineered farm crops like cotton, tomatoes, potatoes, rice, corn, and soybeans.

The approval process for rBGH in Canada became an embarrassing political fiasco when Canadian health officials claimed Monsanto had tried to bribe them, which the company denied, and government scientists testified that they were being pressured by higher-ups to approve rBGH against their better scientific judgment. (See REHW #621.)

Ultimately, Canada gave a thumbs down to rBGH because, as the product label acknowledges, it can cause udder infections, painful, debilitating foot disorders, and reduced life span in treated cows.

U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved the use of rBGH in U.S. dairy cows in November, 1993, without taking a position on the issue of cruelty to animals. Monsanto will not reveal how widely the drug has been adopted by U.S. dairy farmers.

Monsanto says it will appeal the rBGH decision within the Canadian government. But more importantly, Monsanto will ask the World Health Organization's Codex Alimentarius to declare rBGH safe when Codex meets in Rome this coming summer. If Codex issues the statement that Monsanto wants, under the World Trade Organization's rules, Canada will lose its right to ban the use of rBGH within its borders, and Monsanto will be one step closer to its goal.[1] At bottom, this is what "free trade" is about -- freeing transnational corporations from control by nation states. Codex Alimentarius is widely perceived to be dominated not by public-spirited health specialists but by scientists aligned with the interests of transnational corporations.

Despite the recent setback for rBGH in Canada, Monsanto is pressing ahead with its plan to dominate world agriculture by selling genetically modified seeds -- a plan it is pursuing with powerful aid from the highest levels of the U.S. government.

Both inside and outside the U.S., Monsanto is selling two basic varieties of genetically-modified seeds: "Roundup Ready" seeds that have been genetically modified to withstand a heavy soaking with Monsanto's best-selling herbicide, Roundup (glyphosate). And a group of seeds implanted with a Bt gene, which produces a pesticidal toxin in every cell of the resulting plant. Caterpillars that eat any part of such a plant will die, at least until the whole caterpillar population develops "resistance" to the Bt toxin. (For more detail, see REHW #637 and #638.)

Within the U.S., genetically altered crops are rapidly coming into widespread use. In 1995, no genetically-modified crops were grown for commercial sale. Three years later, in 1998, 73 million acres of genetically-modified crops were grown worldwide, more than 50 million acres of them in the U.S. To allow this rapid change to occur with a minimum of resistance from consumers, the FDA has declared that genetically modified foods do not need to be labeled, thus depriving consumers of the opportunity to make an informed choice in the grocery store. You cannot refuse to buy what you cannot identify. It is presently estimated that some 30,000 items in U.S. grocery stores already contain genetically modified organisms.[2]

Monsanto has announced that by the year 2000 (next year), 100% of U.S. soybeans (60 million acres) will be genetically modified.

Actually, 100% really means something like 99.9%. Even if Monsanto reaches it's "100%" goal, there will continue to be a small

acreage devoted to organically-grown, traditional soybeans. However, if Monsanto has its way, even these organically-grown non-genetically-modified soybeans will become difficult to identify. Last year when the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) proposed national standards to define what "organically grown" means, Monsanto and USDA proposed to allow genetically-modified crops to be labeled "organic." (See REHW #583.) After USDA received 300,000 letters of opposition from an angry public, USDA and Monsanto both withdrew the proposal. But three years from now, Monsanto will be back, urging the government to allow the "organic" label on genetically modified crops. If USDA goes along with Monsanto's plan, then the "organic" label will become meaningless and consumers will have to trust their grocers to supply soybeans that have not been genetically modified. But few grocers will have any way to know.

According to a series of reports by Bill Lambrecht in the ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH, Monsanto's overarching plan is to gain approval for genetically modified crops in Europe, then use the European imprimatur to sell its technology to Europe's former colonies in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

It won't be easy. In Ireland, Great Britain, France and India, farmer-led uprisings have burned and destroyed Monsanto's test plots. In India, Monsanto is growing genetically modified plants in green houses constructed of bullet-proof plastic. Monsanto insists its goal is "doing well by doing good" but farmers outside the U.S. are deeply suspicious.

Of particular concern is Monsanto's latest genetic technique called the Technology Protection System, commonly known as "terminator technology." Developed with taxpayer money by the U.S. Department of Agriculture but patented by a Mississippi-based seed company that Monsanto has recently purchased, terminator technology is a genetic technique that renders the seeds of crops sterile after one or two years. This assures that Monsanto's seeds cannot be illegally saved and re-planted year after year.

With terminator technology, anyone who becomes dependent upon Monsanto's genetically-modified seed will have to come back to Monsanto year after year to purchase new seed. By this means, Monsanto will gain a substantial measure of control over the food supply of any nation that widely adopts the company's genetic technologies. It is not a conspiracy, merely a shrewd business venture, but it is clear that Monsanto's goal is effective control of many of the staple crops that presently feed the world.

From its own perspective, the U.S. government evidently believes Monsanto's goal is worth supporting. According to Bill Lambrecht of the ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH, when Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern arrived in the U.S. in 1998 for a St. Patrick's Day visit, he was met by Sandy Berger, the director of the U.S. National Security Council. The topic of conversation at lunch was not peace in war-torn Ireland, but Ireland's pivotal vote in a pending European Community decision on Monsanto's genetically modified corn.[3] Lambrecht reports that when Monsanto flew a group of Irish journalists to the U.S. to help them prepare for the debate over genetically modified foods, their trip included a stop in the Oval Office at the White House -- an inner sanctum that few visitors to Washington ever see.

When the French were reluctant to allow Monsanto's seeds to sprout on French soil, Secretary of State Madeline Albright and U.S. Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky intervened on Monsanto's behalf. When the French still refused to yield, President Clinton personally took up the matter with French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin and gave him "an earful," Lambrecht writes. When that didn't work, Vice-President Gore followed up with a phone call to the French Prime Minister. Ultimately, the French gave in to the steady, high-level pressure.

"Wherever Monsanto seeks to sow, the U.S. government clears the

ground," writes Lambrecht, who calls the U.S. government Monsanto's "most powerful ally."

"From the White House and the National Security Council on down," Lambrecht writes, "the apparatus of the U.S. Government worked this year [1998] on behalf of biotechnology. For Monsanto, at this moment, it is like having an Olympic basketball team with several Michael Jordans." [3]

We are speculating, but it appears to us that the U.S. government may view genetically modified crops as a powerful new arm of U.S. foreign policy. Nations whose staple foods are grown from seed that they must purchase year after year from a handful of U.S. corporations are nations likely to see the world the way the U.S. wants them to see it. When asked, they are likely to play ball, whether they want to or not. A new world order, indeed.

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Readers who would like to become active on this issue are urged to read the new publication, MONSANTO MONITOR, which is now being published in the Netherlands. Available via mail or E-mail. E-mail: biotech@aseed.antenna.nl. Or write: P.O. Box 92066, 1090 AB, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Phone: +31-20-468 2626; fax: +31-20-468 2275. Or: www.antenna.nl/aseed.

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Other excellent sources for action ideas and information include these:

1) Canada's Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI) at www.rafi.org; In North Carolina, phone (919) 542-1396; fax: (919) 542-0069; e-mail: www@rafi.org. In Canada, phone (204) 453-5259; fax: (204) 925-8034; e-mail: rafi@rafi.org.

2) Physicians and Scientists Against Genetically Engineered Food at www.psagef.org/sitemap.htm.

3) The Campaign for Food Safety at www.purefood.org; telephone (218) 226-4164; e-mail alliance@mr.net.

4) Food & Water, 389 Vermont Route 215, Walden, VT 05873; phone: (802) 563-3300; fax: (802) 563-3310. Their FOOD & WATER JOURNAL is must reading.

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)

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[1] Kelly Morris, "Bovine somatotropin--who's crying over spilt milk?" LANCET Vol. 353 (January 23, 1999), pg. 306. For more detail on this story, see Brewster and Cathleen Kneen, "rbGH--for the last time?" RAM'S HORN No. 166 (February 1999), pg. 1. The RAM'S HORN [ISSN 0827-4053]: S-12, C-11, R.R. #1, Sorrento, B.C. V0E 2W0, Canada, is \$20 (U.S.) per year (11 issues). E-mail: ramshorn@jetstream.net; or phone (250) 835-8561. Well worth the price.

[2] These big-name products include genetically modified ingredients: Coca-Cola (corn syrup and/or Aspartame), Fritos (corn), Green Giant Harvest Burgers (soy), McDonald's french fries (potatoes), Nestle's chocolate (soy), Karo corn syrup (corn), NutraSweet (Aspartame), Kraft salad dressings (canola oil), Fleishmann's margarine (soy), Similac infant formula (soy), Land o' Lakes butter (rBGH), Cabot Creamery Butter (rBGH).

If you want to avoid genetically modified products entirely, stay away from non-organic tomatoes, potatoes, corn, soy, canola and

yellow squash. Avoid corn syrup and fructose--which are in almost all beverages and sodas (even health food brands) and in almost all sweet products, yogurt and aspirin. Avoid non-organic corn oil, cornstarch, corn meal, baking soda, baking powder, glyucose syrup. Avoid soy; soy flour in baked goods, pizza, cookies, cakes, pasta; fillers in meat products (for example Big Macs), vegetarian meat substitutes (for example tofu, tofu burgers, tofu hot dogs), soy milk, infant formula, babyfoods; diet and protein shakes, protein bars; chocolate and candy bars; margarine; ice cream; pet food; soy oil in salad dressings and snack chips; soy sauce; lecithin and soy lecithin. In all, well over 30,000 products.

Aspartame--the artificial sweetener Equal or NutraSweet--contains a genetically engineered enzyme, as do most non-organic cheeses. Amylase (used in making bread, flour, whole wheat flour, cereals, starch), Catalase (used in making soft drinks, egg whites, liquid whey) and Lactase are all genetically altered.

Most livestock and commercial seafood are being fed genetically modified feed. Commercial pork has been genetically altered with DNA from human beings.

Data from: Phillip Frazer and Annie Berthold-Bond, editors, NEWS ON EARTH, December, 1998, pg. 4. NEWS ON EARTH [ISSN 1099-0054] is a high-quality environmental newsletter published monthly; write them at 175 Fifth Avenue, Ste. 2245, NY, NY 10010; or noe@newslet.com; or phone (212) 741-2365.

[3] Bill Lambrecht, "World Recoils at Monsanto's Brave New Crops," ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH December 27, 1998, pg. A1.

Descriptor terms: Monsanto; biotechnology; food safety; pesticides; food security; U.S. foreign policy; genetic engineering; rbgh; bovine growth hormone; Canada; roundup; glyphosate; bt; resistance; organic standards; usda; fda; Bill Lambrecht; France; Ireland; terminator technology; National Security Council;