

**Monsanto Nation: Taking Down Goliath - By Ronnie Cummins  
Organic Consumers Association, July 27, 2011 Straight to the Source**

- [http://www.organicconsumers.org/articles/article\\_23693.cfm](http://www.organicconsumers.org/articles/article_23693.cfm)

**"If you put a label on genetically engineered food you might as well put a skull and crossbones on it." - Norman Braksick, president of Asgrow Seed Co., a subsidiary of Monsanto, quoted in the Kansas City Star, March 7, 1994**

After two decades of biotech bullying and force-feeding unlabeled and hazardous genetically engineered (GE) foods to animals and humans, it's time to move beyond defensive measures and go on the offensive. With organic farming, climate stability, and public health under the gun of the gene engineers and their partners in crime, it's time to do more than complain. With over 1/3 of U.S. cropland already contaminated with Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), with **mounting scientific evidence** that GMOs cause cancer, birth defects, and serious food allergies and with new **biotech mutants** like alfalfa, lawn grass, ethanol-ready corn, 2,4 D-resistant crops, and genetically engineered trees and animals in the pipeline, time is running out.

Living in Monsanto Nation there can be no such thing as "coexistence." It is impossible to coexist with a reckless industry that endangers public health, bribes public officials, corrupts scientists, manipulates the media, destroys biodiversity, kills the soil, pollutes the environment, tortures and poisons animals, destabilizes the climate, and economically enslaves the world's 1.5 billion seed-saving small farmers. It's time to take down the Biotech Behemoth, before the living web of biodiversity is terminated.

But, to bring down Goliath and build an organic future, we need to be strategic, as well as bold. We must take the time to carefully analyze our strengths and weaknesses and critique our previous efforts. Then we must prepare to concentrate our forces where our adversary is weak, like a chess master, moving the field of battle from Monsanto's currently impregnable territory into more favorable terrain. Given the near-dictatorial control of Monsanto, the Farm Bureau, and the Grocery Manufacturers Association over the Congress, the White House, regulatory agencies, and state legislators, we have no choice in the present moment but to revert to "asymmetrical" guerrilla tactics, to seek out the Achilles heel or fundamental weakness of the biotech industry.

### **Consumers' Right to Know: Monsanto's Achilles Heel**

The Achilles heel of Monsanto and the biotech industry is consumers' right to know. If GE-tainted foods are labeled in supermarkets and natural food stores, a massive rejection of chemical and GMO foods will take place, transforming the marketplace and supercharging the organic and local foods revolution. The biotech industry has been aware of their tremendous vulnerability in the United States ever since Monsanto forced their controversial recombinant Bovine Growth Hormone on the market in February 1994. In the wake of nationwide "Frankenfood" protests and milk dumps, industry made sure that no federal labeling or safety testing would be required. As the biotechnocrats understand full well, mandatory GE food labels will cripple the industry: consumers will not buy gene-altered foods, farmers will not plant them, restaurants and food processors will avoid them, and grocery stores will not sell them. How can we be certain about this? By looking at the experience of the European Union, the largest agricultural market in the world. In the EU, there are almost no genetically engineered crops under cultivation or GE consumer food products on supermarket shelves. And why is this? Not because GE crops are automatically banned in Europe. But rather because under EU law, all foods containing genetically engineered ingredients must be labeled.

European consumers have the freedom to choose or not to choose GE foods; while farmers, food processors, and retailers have (at least legally) the right to lace foods with GMOs, as long as these gene-altered are safety-tested and labeled. Of course the EU food industry understands that consumers, for the most part, do not want to consume GE foods. European farmers and food companies, even junk food purveyors like McDonald's and Wal-Mart, understand quite well the concept expressed by the Monsanto executive quoted above: "If you put a label on genetically engineered food you might as well put a skull and crossbones on it."

The biotech and food industry are acutely conscious of the fact that North American consumers, like their European counterparts, are wary and suspicious of GMO foods. Even without a PhD, consumers understand you don't want your food safety or environmental sustainability decisions to be made by out-of-control chemical companies like Monsanto, Dow, or DuPont - the same people who brought you toxic pesticides and industrial chemicals, Agent Orange, carcinogenic food additives, PCBs, and now global warming. Industry leaders are definitely aware of the fact that every poll over the last 20 years has shown that 85-95% of American consumers want mandatory labels on genetically engineered foods. Why do consumers want labels? So that we can avoid buying these mutant foods, gene-spliced with viruses, bacteria, antibiotic-resistant marker genes and foreign DNA. Gene-altered foods have absolutely no benefits for consumers or the environment, only hazards. This is why Monsanto and their friends in the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations have prevented consumer GMO truth-in-labeling laws from ever getting a public discussion, much less coming to a vote, in Congress.

Although Congressman Dennis Kucinich (Democrat, Ohio) perennially introduces a bill in Congress calling for mandatory labeling and safety testing for GE foods, don't hold your breath for Congress to take a stand for truth-in-labeling. Especially since the 2010 Supreme Court decision in the so-called "Citizens United" case gave big corporations, millionaires, and billionaires the right to spend unlimited amounts of money (and remain anonymous, as they do so) to buy media coverage and elections, our chances of passing federal GMO labeling laws against the wishes of Monsanto and Food Inc. are all but non-existent.

Perfectly dramatizing the "Revolving Door" between Monsanto and the Federal Government, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, formerly chief counsel for Monsanto, delivered one of the decisive votes in the Citizens United case, in effect giving Monsanto and other biotech bullies the right to buy the votes it needs in the U.S. Congress.

With biotech and industrial agriculture's big money controlling Congress, the White House, and the corporate mass media, we have little choice but to shift our focus and our campaigning to more favorable terrain: the state level and the marketplace.

Besides boycotting non-organic foods likely containing GMOs (even those marketed as "natural") and demanding that natural food stores adopt truth-in-labeling practices, we've got to push for mandatory GE food labeling laws in the legislatures of those few remaining states like Vermont where Monsanto and corporate agribusiness do not yet have total control. Of the 18 states where GE food labeling legislation has been introduced over the past two years, only in Vermont does our side seem to have the votes to push labeling through, as well as a Governor who will not cave in to Monsanto.

### **State Ballot Initiatives: Monsanto and Biotech's Greatest Weakness**

Although passing a mandatory GE foods labeling law in Vermont is a distinct possibility, and something we should all support, the most promising strategy for restoring consumers' right to know lies in utilizing one of the most important remaining tools of direct citizen democracy, state ballot initiatives. A state ballot initiative is a means by which a petition signed by a certain minimum number of registered voters can bring about a public vote on a proposed statute or constitutional amendment, in this case a law requiring mandatory

labeling of genetically engineered foods. Ballot initiatives are also called, depending on the state, "popular initiatives," "voter initiatives," "citizen initiatives" or just "initiatives."

**Twenty-four states**, mainly west of the Mississippi, allow ballot initiatives. Each state has its own requirements for how many signatures are required, how many days can be spent collecting the signatures, and when petitions must be turned in. States also vary on the average amount of money spent by initiative committees to support or oppose ballot measures.

The essential advantage of state ballot initiatives is that they enable the grassroots (in our case the 85-95% of consumers who want labels on GE-tainted foods) to bypass corrupt politicians, industry lobbyists, and special interest legislative practices. In addition, the very strategic point to keep in mind is that it will not be necessary to pass GMO labeling ballot initiatives in all 24 of these states. In fact, passage in just one large state, for example, California, where there is tremendous opposition to GE foods as well as a multi-billion dollar organic food industry, will likely have the same impact as a national labeling law.

If Vermont passes a state labeling law through its legislature in 2011, or California voters put a GMO labeling initiative on the ballot in 2012 and pass it, the biotech and food industry will face an intractable dilemma. Will they dare put labels on their branded food products in just one or two states, admitting these products contain genetically engineered ingredients, while still withholding label information in the other states? The answer is very likely no. Withholding important and controversial information in some states, while providing it to consumers in other states, would be a public relations disaster.

A clear precedent for this situation was established in California in 1986 when voters passed, over the strenuous opposition of industry, a ballot initiative called Proposition 65, which required consumer products with potential cancer-causing ingredient to bear warning labels. Rather than label their products sold in California as likely carcinogenic, most companies reformulated their product ingredients so as to avoid warning labels altogether, and they did this on a national scale, not just in California.

This same scenario will likely unfold if California voters pass a ballot initiative in 2012 requiring labels on food containing genetically engineered ingredients. Can you imagine Kellogg's selling Corn Flakes breakfast cereal in California with a label that admits it contains genetically engineered corn? Or labeling their corn flakes as GE in California, but not divulging this same fact to consumers in the other 49 states or Canada? Of course not. How about Kraft Boca Burgers admitting that their soybean ingredients are genetically modified? How about the entire non-organic food industry (including many so-called "natural" brands) admitting that 75% of their products are GE-tainted? Once food manufacturers and supermarkets are forced to come clean and label genetically engineered products, they will likely remove all GE ingredients, to avoid the "skull and crossbones" effect, just like the food industry in the EU has done. In the wake of this development American farmers will convert millions of acres of GE crops to non-GMO or organic varieties.

The biotechnocrats and their allies have indeed used their vast resources to buy off Congress, the White House, and most state legislatures with campaign contributions. Monsanto, DuPont, and other corporate giants have used their enormous clout to send their lawyers and scientists through the revolving door into jobs as government regulators. Biotech's financial power has polluted state and federal governments, along with trade associations, universities, research institutions, philanthropic organizations, and media outlets.

But there are two things Monsanto's money can't buy: Our trust, and our votes.

## **Polls Show Consumers Overwhelmingly Support GE Food Labels**

Poll after poll has shown that most consumers want to know whether their food includes engineered ingredients.

The results of a recent MSNBC poll that posed the question, "Do you believe genetically modified foods should be labeled?" indicate that nearly all Americans believe that foods made with genetically modified organisms should indeed be labeled.

Of the more than 45,000 people who participated in the poll, over 96% answered "Yes. It's an ethical issue - consumers should be informed so they can make a choice."

It's not news that most Americans support labeling of GMO foods. Since genetically modified foods were first introduced in mid-1990s, scores of public opinion polls have shown that the vast majority of consumers want mandatory labeling of all genetically modified foods. These include recent polls by CBS News/New York Times, NPR/Thomson Reuters and the Consumers Union. Unfortunately, Congress and the White House have ignored these polls, accepting instead the claims of lobbyists and indentured scientists that genetically engineered foods are perfectly safe, and that uninformed and scientifically illiterate Americans must not be given the choice to buy or not to buy GMOs, because they will reject them.

Monsanto spent more than \$1 million on the 2010 election cycle, splitting its contributions evenly between state and federal candidates. It spends much more on lobbying - more than \$8 million in each of the last three years. Monsanto's money has bought it influence and allowed it to move its lawyers and scientists through the revolving door into roles within the regulatory agencies. The USDA, FDA and State Department are full of appointees with connections to Monsanto. Monsanto's efforts have successfully stifled attempts in Congress and state legislatures to pass GMO labeling legislation.

### **The Slingshot that Can Bring Down Goliath**

The most important advantage or weapon in a ballot initiative (or in a grassroots legislative lobbying campaign) is to have the overwhelming support of the people, especially registered voters. As poll after poll has shown, 85-95% of Americans support mandatory GE food labels. No matter how much money Monsanto and their allies spend to defeat a ballot initiative, it is very difficult to turn back overwhelming public sentiment. Monsanto has become one of the most hated corporations on earth.

The second requirement for a successful ballot initiative is to have the active support of a massive grassroots movement, like the growing anti-GE food movement and OCA's Millions Against Monsanto campaign. This grassroots movement can gather petition signatures, mobilize public opinion, and get out the vote. No matter how much money Monsanto and their allies spend, it will be very difficult to defeat a volunteer grassroots army of organic consumers who enjoy the massive support of the public.

The third prerequisite for victory is to have the ability to raise significant sums of money. Not only do we have millions of organic consumers in the U.S. who are passionately opposed to GMOs, and willing to **donate** to a labeling campaign, but we also have a rapidly growing \$30 billion organic food industry that depends upon keeping GMO contamination out of the organic sector. We probably won't be able to raise enough money to outspend Monsanto, the Farm Bureau, and the Grocery Manufacturers Association, but we can raise enough money to defend our popular position and maintain majority support.

Just like everything in U.S. politics, ballot initiatives have a price tag.

According to the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center:

- **"The chances of victory are directly correlated with the amount of money raised and are almost always proportional to the amount of money the opposition spends."**
- **"People power is equally important to factor in. Particularly for Citizen-based ballot initiative efforts, it is imperative to have people on the ground across the state that are connected and invested in the initiative."**

### **Biotechnology or BioDemocracy?**

Restoring consumers' right to know and driving genetically engineered foods off supermarket shelves are not going to solve all of the life and death issues that are currently staring us in the face: the climate crisis, endless wars, economic depression, corporate control over government, and the health crisis. But cutting Monsanto and the biotechnocrats down to size and restoring consumer choice are a good first step to move us toward sustainability and a healthy food and farming system. Just as important, in political terms, by defeating the Biotech Bullies and indentured politicians, we can begin to restore the tattered self-confidence of the American body politic. A resounding victory by the organic community and OCA's Millions Against Monsanto campaign will prove to ourselves and the currently demoralized public that we can indeed take back control over the institutions and public policies that determine our daily lives. Now is the time to move forward.