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Farmers, protestors struggle against GMO giant Monsanto

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Eco Catholic

When environmental writer and entrepreneur Paul Hawken wrote *Blessed Unrest* in 2007, he estimated that there were close to 2 million activist organizations, secular and religious, working worldwide to heal the wounds of the earth.

Five years later, given social media and growing consciousness, it is probably safe to guess the 2 million is expanding outward to include even more willing, generous hearts. We need them badly.

In his book, Hawken quotes the late Utah Phillips, folk singer, labor organizer and storyteller: "The Earth is not dying -- it is being killed. And the people who are killing it have names and addresses."

Funny how Monsanto, the corporate genetically modified organism (GMO) giant that has given us Roundup weed killer, Frankenfoods and lawsuits against struggling farmers, seems to stand at the top of so many of these address lists.

During the next few weeks and months, the strength in the numbers of protestors and petition signers can truly make a difference -- in this case, taking action against the corporate agribusiness by requiring the labeling of GMO foods and even trying to shut one corporation down. Both are daunting tasks.

Monsanto seems to come out on top and stay there, no matter what. The company wins lawsuits. A major computer industry giant is an investor and touts its products.

In recent days, FoodFirst.org reported that on Feb. 24, New York Judge Naomi Buchwald dismissed a case of the Organic Seed Growers and Trade Association against Monsanto. Eighty-three organic farmers,

seed growers and agricultural organizations representing farmers and citizens sought legal protection against Monsanto's right to bring lawsuits against them for patent infringement should their crops become contaminated with GMO pollen.

The Food First website quotes the plaintiff's lead attorney, Daniel Ravicher, who said: "Her decision to deny farmers the right to seek legal protection from one of the world's foremost patent bullies is gravely disappointing. Her belief that farmers are acting unreasonable when they stop growing certain crops to avoid being sued by Monsanto for patent infringement should their crops become contaminated maligns the intelligence and integrity of those farmers."

The website says Monsanto has a history of aggressive investigations and lawsuits against farmers in America. Since the mid-90s, 144 farmers have had lawsuits brought against them for alleged violations of their patented seed technology. An additional 700 farmers settled out of court rather "than face Monsanto's belligerent litigious actions."

Many of these farmers claim to not have had the intention to grow or save seeds that contain Monsanto's patented genes. Seeds and pollen drift from neighboring genetically engineered crops onto neighboring fields.

"Family farmers need the protection of the court," said Maine organic seed farmer Jim Gerritsen, lead plaintiff for OSGATA. "We reject as naive and undefendable the judge's assertion that Monsanto's vague public relations (not to sue) should be a 'source of comfort' to plaintiffs. The truth is, we are under threat, and we do not believe Monsanto. The truth is that American farmers and the America people do not believe Monsanto."

Activists are fighting back on other fronts. The Organic Consumers Association reports that thousands of volunteers and paid signature-gatherers took to the streets of California to get 820,000 signatures to get The California Rights to Know Genetically Engineered Food on the November ballot. The initiative would require food manufacturers and retail stores in California to label genetically engineered foods -- a move they believe will be a way to get GE products out of the nation's food supply for good.

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In its Organic Bytes section, the association is asking activists to tell the EPA to ban Monsanto's insecticide-producing GMO crops:

"Monsanto's insecticide-producing bacterial DNA survives digestion and is now found in the blood of more than 80 % of North American women -- and their fetuses! Scientists say the exposure comes from a typical (non-organic) diet, primarily through the consumption of animals fed GMO crops. The chronic health impacts of exposure to GMO Bt genes is unknown, but Monsanto's own study of rats fed crops showed liver and kidney damage."

In the same posting, The Organic Consumers reports that activists began protesting all over the world March 17 to shut down Monsanto. Cities in Africa, Asia, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Canada joined 30 cities in the United States in protest.

At this writing, there are a host of Occupy Monsanto actions throughout the United States, Africa, Asia, Japan, Canada, Latin American and Europe scheduled to take place the rest of this month.

Lastly, news about Bill Gates' investments in Monsanto is resurfacing again. Last month, *The Seattle Times* published an op-ed piece by South African agricultural consultant and researcher Glenn Ashton in which Ashton takes Gates to task for his support of genetically modified crops.

In 2010, Gates purchased 500,000 shares of the biotech giant, explaining that Monsanto's genetically modified creations are a needed tool to prevent starvation in poor nations. Ashton counters that Gates' "technocratic ideology" runs counter to the best-informed science. Both the World Bank and United Nations funded 900 scientists to do an assessment of agricultural knowledge, technology and science in light of development. Its conclusions after three years: The use of genetically modified crops is not a meaningful solution to the complex situation of world hunger.

The study recommended that instead of espousing industrial farming models, countries need to remain with "agro-ecological" methods because they provide the most viable means to enhance global food security, especially in light of climate change, Ashton writes.

"Agro-ecology has consistently proven capable of sustainability," Ashton writes. "Conversely, the present GM crops generally have not increased yields over the long run, despite their increased costs and dependence on agricultural chemicals, as highlighted in the 2009 Union of Concerned Scientists report, 'Failure to Yield.'"

Thus, Gates' GM "solutions" depend on higher-cost inputs, such as fertilizers, pest controls and the special seeds themselves, distracting attention from proven, lower-cost approaches.

Ashton says of Gates: "For one of the world's wealthiest men to presume he can provide all of the (agricultural) solutions is arrogant. His 'near-religious faith in technology' (as described in a recent business journal) conflicts with the practical work" of the 900 scientists and "grass-roots democratic agronomic movements. ... "Africans urge Bill Gates to engage with us in a more-broadly consultative, agro-ecological approach."

On a final note, some of Jesus's words from the Gospel of Mark come to mind. Jesus reassures his disciples that his heavenly father wants the best for creation.

"Is there any one among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Of if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?" In a bit of Midrash, we might consider how human beings thrive on eggs and fish. GMOs have given us scorpions.

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