



Monthly Bulletin
on *Genetic Engineering*
November 2011

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SAGE CHRONICLE

SAGE – KARNATAKA

SAGE – KARNATAKA organized a workshop on ‘Consumer and the Right to Safe Food and Food Security’ on 1st October 2011 at the National Law School of India University, Bengaluru

The issue of Food safety and Food security cannot be left to the state alone. The civil society is increasingly playing a significant role in formulation, implementation and monitoring of laws in general and those in the field of food safety and security. A strong and well- informed, empowered civil society is essential to transfer the benefits of these legislations. In this background the Chair on Consumer Law and Practice, NLSIU, Southern Action on Genetic Engineering (SAGE) and the Consumer Rights Education & Awareness Trust [CREAT], organized a one day workshop on ‘Consumer and the Right to Safe Food and Food Security’ on 1st October 2011 at Bengaluru. The object of the workshop was to sensitize the civil society organizations about the growing concern of food safety in the context of globalization of food trade and application of modern technology like biotechnology to food, and the need for food security amidst growing hunger and increasing instances of deaths due to starvation.

The workshop commenced with a brief welcome by G.Muralidharan of CREAT. The objects and background of the workshops were presented by Shri.Babu of SAGE. He said that the entry of GM foods needs to be looked into from different angles like human safety, environment, impact on the ecosystem, livelihoods of farmers, agricultural trade, and climate. He said that a few of the prominent civil society groups have come under the banner of SAGE to counter the threats of GM food. Shri.Babu said that civil society groups involved in consumer protection have a larger responsibility as GM food is related to safety of human lives. Sri Babu explained that the growing commercialization of food has led to unsafe food being sold to consumers. The growth of multinational corporations in food business had also given rise to certain unethical practices, which act against consumer welfare. He said that ultimately it is consumers who are the end users, who are the sufferers. Hence, there is a need to know more about food safety, the steps to fight against unethical practices and the measures to counter the threat of GM food.

The workshop was inaugurated by Prof.Joga Rao, NLSIU. He said that the entry of GM food should be viewed not only from the point of safety but also in terms of ethics. He said that consumers should be vigilant and contribute qualitatively on the policies and programs of the country. The workshop addressed the various aspects of GM food, food safety, and right to food. Shri.Sanganal, representing the Public Health Institute, Government of Karnataka, highlighted the dangers of unsafe food from production to consumption. He also explained the precautions the consumers need to take so that they do not end up as victims of unsafe food. Shri.P.Ramamurthy, Food Safety Inspector (Retd.) explained the main provisions of the Food Safety and Standards Act. He emphasized the role of the State Government in implementing this important Act. Shri.Y.G.Muralidharan made a quick presentation on the important features of food safety and standards Act

Ms.Sudha K, Convener, Right to Food Campaign (Karnataka) made a presentation on the citizens’ right to food. She explained the origin and growth of right to food campaign and explained the features of the Supreme Court judgment on the right to food, the directions given by the Court with regard to revamping the public distribution system, the working of anganwadi, and the ICDS (midday meal scheme). Ms.Sudha also highlighted the recent Wadhwa Committee Report on the working of PDS.

Shri.Nagesh Hegde made a presentation on the dangers of GM food. Citing the examples from across the world he said that GM food has been a failure in terms of food safety. He said that a large number of studies and surveys have proved that GM food is neither an answer to growing hunger or food safety. The impact of GE food on human health was deliberated exhaustively by Ms.Aruna Kalahastri of SAGE/ Bhoomi Network. She brought to the notice of the participants a large number of instances of the dangers of GM technology in general and GM food in particular. She dealt with the effect of GM food on human health, environment and ecology as a whole. A Kannada booklet on GM in Agriculture was released by Shri. Baramagoudar, a farmer leader.

After daylong deliberations, the workshop decided upon the following plan of action.

- a. Consumer groups should acquire sufficient knowledge and expertise on topics related to GM food, food safety legislation etc
- b. A state level alliance is to be formed to strengthen the campaign on food safety in general and GM food in particular
- c. Farmers, doctors, policy makers and media persons are to be involved
- d. Local bodies/institutions are to be targeted in the campaign on food safety
- e. The state government should comply with the requirements of the food safety legislations
- f. The Organic Agricultural Mission of the GoK is to be promoted/encouraged
- g. A survey of foods/processed foods containing GM ingredients is to be undertaken
- h. Local bodies are to be pressurized to pass a resolution those areas under their jurisdiction will not allow growth of GM crops, GM Cotton plants etc.
- i. Ascertain the views of the GoK on GM crops, if necessary, through use of RTI Act
- j. Hold regional workshops/outreach meetings to inform educate and empower local communities against the dangers of GM food etc.



SAGE –Karnataka organized workshop for Kannada media persons on October 14 on GE issues, several media people participated in the day long workshop held at Bengaluru

SAGE – TAMILNADU

Kudumbam organized orientation programmes for school children and teachers in 5 schools (Odugampatti, Vaaliyampatti, Kunadandar Koil, Kulathur & Udayalipatti of Pudukkottai district and 1 school at Trichy district. The students of Bharathidasan University who are trained at the zonal level training organized by Kudumbam were involved in orienting the school children along with the Kudumbam team.

On 15th October 2011, a team of 17 teachers from St. Joseph Anglo Indian Matriculation School were oriented with GMO issues at Kolunji farm. Subsequently, on 28th October 2011, Kudumbam organized a one-day programme both for the students of 7th, 8th, 9th standard and the JOSA (Joseph Old Students Association) members in which around 40 students participated.



On 29th October 2011, Vanagam organized a village-level awareness programme.

At the State level, SAGE Steering Committee meeting was held on 10th October at Kudumbam office, Trichy. Mr. Murali and Mr. Suresh Kanna visited Assisi garments at Thiruppur on 18th October. A materials' planning meeting was held on 19th October at Women's Collective office in which Mr. Suresh, Mr. Murali, Mrs. Sheelu and Mrs. Salome participated and listed out the materials for different set of audiences.

SAGE – SAMVADA

9th oct, 2011. SMART Trust Veeredevana pura, Nanjangud Taluk, Mysore Dist.

The trust is dedicated to promote organic/natural farming, chemical free agriculture, confidence building among farmers, and native seed preservation.

The one day workshop was aimed at introducing secondary school children to farming practices, soil, water etc. SAGE, Mysore was invited to speak on the dangers of GMOs in food and farming. The participants, about 50, were secondary school children (both boys and girls) and some organic farmers, educationists, academicians, and rotarians.



SAGE – ANDHRA PRADESH

SABALA – SARADA VALLEY DEVELOPMENT SAMITHI organized Civil Society Workshop on GE at Vizianagaram on 22nd Oct. 2011

K. Saraswati welcomed the gathering. The Director of MRPG College **Sri Hanumanthu Rao** garu inaugurated the workshop and boldly declared that all must oppose GE on Agriculture.

Mr. K.Joginaidu anchored the proceedings of the workshop. He livened up his take on GE agriculture with examples of Warangal Bt. Cotton and other stories on GE technologies. Mr. Joginaidu gave a good power point presentation on GE.

The Head of department of Social Work **Mr. Viswa Bushan** spoke on the negative impacts of GE technology in agriculture. The electronic and print media gave wide coverage to the proceedings of the workshop. They took interviews of the participants.

Mr. Jagannadh from Pragathi Marga Kendra (PMK) focused on the theme of traditional crops vs. GE crops. He gave many illustrations during his talk. He interacted with the students during the workshop on traditional agriculture.

The agriculture farmers raised questions on GE technology. The secretary of SABALA **Ms. K.Saraswathi** explained the impact of GE on agriculture.

The workshop also featured a cultural programme which was hugely enjoyed by the participants. At the end, all the participants took oath to work against Genetic Engineering Agriculture, Food and Farming. Plants were distributed to all the participants as a memento in the evening. Mr. Atchimnaidu conveyed thanks to all the participants. About 60 people participated in the daylong workshop.



National News

GM Rice Trial Waiting for Expert Committee Opinion

The field trial of a genetically modified rice variety has been deferred till an expert committee formed to look into the food security aspect submits its report.

West Bengal Environment Minister Sudarshan Ghosh Dastidar said here that the three-member committee would file its report on October 30 after which a final decision would be taken. Ghosh told *PTI* that the trial, scheduled to be held at the Chinsurah Rice Research Station, was stopped following concern expressed by agricultural experts.

“Such a trial needs to be carried out at a proper ‘isolation distance’ and the field for the trial has to be made at a minimum distance of 300 metres from other existing crops,” he said quoting the experts.

The minister said various multinational companies controlling the GM seed bank are trying desperately to foist the GM crops into the country. He said that such trials of GM crops would jeopardise food security and undermine the existing seed bank in the country. Agricultural experts have expressed reservation that such transgenic rice variety might pose a threat to bio-diversity and affect other existing seeds, thus disturbing the food security.

Earlier, field trials of genetically modified brinjal had also been cancelled on same food security concerns. The particular rice variety on which trial was to be conducted is named ‘*Oryza sativa L*’ containing gene for high iron content.

Calcutta University had got the permission to conduct the trials from the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) in November, last year.

However, GEAC had put a condition that the trial has to be made at an ‘isolation distance’ of 200 metres (either to keep the area vacant or to grow any crop other than rice) to avoid genetic contamination of rice germplasm maintained there. Experts said the Chinsurah rice station does not have enough space to

have a 200-metre ‘isolation distance’ on its four sides and pointed out that in any case GM foodgrain is banned across the world.

Filed On: Oct 27, 2011 12:01 IST <http://news.outlookindia.com/items.aspx?artid=739586>

Bt Brinjal and India’s Wake-up Call

With its first biopiracy lawsuit, the country hopes to set a precedent for introducing biotech crops while conserving biodiversity and local community rights by [Seema Singh](#) | Oct 20, 2011

Every inch of the auditorium at Bangalore’s Central College campus was filled. Outside, it was nothing short of a spectacle, with protestors armed with brinjal cutouts and faces painted purple. Inside, the then environment minister Jairam Ramesh was fielding a barrage of questions, as he held a public consultation on the release of the genetically modified Bt brinjal on February 6, 2010. Questions were flying fast and furious that day. In the midst of all that, the minister suddenly made a phone call to his office. He wanted to check if Bangalore NGO Environment Support Group’s (ESG) allegation that the Indian Biodiversity Act of 2002 had been violated was valid. Soon after the call, he quashed the allegation saying there was no violation and moved on. ESG’s point was that to develop Bt brinjal, multinational biotech firm Monsanto, Maharashtra Hybrid Seeds Company (Mahyco) and their collaborators used several local varieties of brinjal without taking approval from any national or local biodiversity authority. The Act lays down a rigorous process of approval to

- (a) protect loss of biodiversity through misuse, theft, or contamination from transgenics (where genetic material has been transferred from another organism, like in Bt brinjal); and
- (b) to safeguard the interests of farmers by ensuring they get a share in the benefits as per the internationally applicable Access and Benefit Sharing Protocol.

More than a year later, ESG has a case. It's pending before the National Biodiversity Authority (NBA). This was made public by the NBA on August 11, 2011. Barely a month later, on September 6, the minister of state for environment and forests, Jayanti Natarajan, in a reply to questions in the Rajya Sabha said: "NBA has decided to proceed as per law against the alleged violators on the basis of reports of the State Biodiversity Board (SBB) for accessing and using the local brinjal varieties without prior approval of the competent authority."

The ball is now in NBA's court, which took more than a year and four reminders from Karnataka SBB to take up this case. An inconspicuous regulatory body, which has had several senior bureaucrats at its helm but none choosing to exercise its power and jurisdiction, NBA today is facing the heat. It has a test case to prove that India, one of the 12 mega biodiversity countries, can protect its bio-resources. With this case, it can set a deterrent for future violations and ensure transparent commercialisation of products derived from local bio-resources.

As one of the architects of the Bio-Diversity Bill and noted agricultural scientist, M.S. Swaminathan, says, "It is a wake up call for India to set its house in order."

That task rests with the new NBA chairman Balakrishna Pisupati who took charge in mid August in a significant career move from the United Nations Environment Programme. "You sometimes need, unfortunately, such cases for people to sit up and realise that there are important provisions in the Act to be followed."

The Case

Bt brinjal was developed by inserting a gene from the soil bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis* into the genome of various brinjal cultivars. It can withstand pests and therefore give better yields.

In 2009, the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) cleared Bt brinjal for commercialisation. Soon after, ESG co-founder

Leo Saldanha was approached by the Karnataka Organic Farmers Association. Farmers feared the Bt crop would contaminate the regular varieties of brinjal.

Saldanha was aware of similar cases of contamination involving Bt cotton, where export consignments of organic cotton were rejected by France and Germany. He then began investigating if the local farmers knew which varieties of brinjal were chosen by the University of Agricultural Sciences (UAS), Dharwad for genetic modification with technology support from Mahyco, and whether they approved of this. Saldanha says he wanted to ensure that farmers, who conserved the varieties over generations, got their due under the access and benefit sharing provision of the Act.

Bt Brinjal was developed by ABSP-II (Agricultural Biotechnology Support Project), a consortium of public and private sector institutions funded by the United States Agency for International Development and led by Cornell University. It was formed to develop and commercialise bio-engineered products in developing countries. Mahyco, Sathguru Management Consultants, Hyderabad, and UAS are collaborators of ABSP-II.

It turns out nobody thought it necessary to take approval from the local farmers' group or the apex body, NBA. Under the Act, no permission is required if varieties are chosen for conventional breeding. But if a local variety (folk varieties and land races that have been conserved by farmers over generations) is chosen for modification, whether for research or commercial use, it needs approval from the local biodiversity management committee or the NBA.

Monsanto, which has licensed the Bt gene to Mahyco and is a 26 percent stakeholder in the latter, says it has not violated any law. "We have not been notified by the NBA or any other authority of any case filed by the said ESG," says Gyanendra Shukla, director, cotton-traits and corporate affairs, Monsanto India.

Read more: <http://business.in.com/article/real-issue/bt-brinjal-and-indias-wakeup-call/29252/1#ixzz1c5P6cp9W>

Global

In Less Than Three Weeks, Over a Quarter of a Million Americans Say They Want the FDA to Label Genetically Engineered Foods

Just Label It campaign rallies consumers everywhere to comment on FDA petition

PR Newswire NEW YORK and DENVER, Oct. 27, 2011

WHEN: October 27, 2011

WHAT: Since the launch of the national consumer campaign Just Label It: We Have a Right to Know, which supported a petition submitted to the Food and Drug Administration calling for the labeling of genetically engineered (GE) foods, **284,474** Americans have submitted comments to the FDA urging immediate action. The Just Label It Campaign is a broad coalition comprised of more than 400 businesses and organizations representing healthcare, consumer advocates, food retailers, food companies, and fisheries. Consumers from across the nation have rallied around the petition and are demanding transparency in labeling so they can make more informed decisions about what they eat and what they feed their families.

WHY: It is estimated that 60%-70% of processed foods available in U.S. grocery stores likely contain some GE material. [[Congressional Research Service](#)]. But currently, the consumer has no idea of knowing if what they are buying contains these ingredients. With diabetes, obesity and allergens on the rise, and food safety scares occurring regularly, people are asking questions and want to know more about their food. And recently two studies were released showing that consumers are increasingly concerned about the way food is grown. Although FDA has asked for input a number of times on whether it should require labeling of GMOs, it has never taken action. By contrast, labeling is required in more than 50 nations around the world including the 15

countries of the European Union, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Korea, Brazil and China.

ABOUT: [JustLabelIt.org](#) offers consumers an easy, one-click method to ask FDA to label GE foods and stay up to date on the campaign's progress. The site also offers education tools to get informed about GE foods, the benefits of labeling foods and ways to stay engaged through blogs and social media

http://www.bizjournals.com/denver/prnewswire/press_releases/Colorado/2011/10/27/NY95163

GMO foods linked to cancer for profits

Date: 23 October 2011

Posted By : [Special to The Canadian](#)

Two research studies have independently demonstrated evidence that genetically engineered foods have resulted in [allergenic reactions, fertility consequences and immune issues from GM Bt corn](#). [One 10 year study on GM peas](#) was discontinued after it was learned that they were causing lung damage in mice. Scientists at the York Laboratory found that [allergic reactions to soy jumped by 50% over the previous year](#), at the same time that GM soy had been introduced.

Despite industry claims to the contrary, GM foods have been linked to cancer. Monsanto's GM-derived rBGH (which is a genetically-altered growth hormone given to dairy cows to make them more milk) was shown to increase the production of IGF-1 from 70-1000%. IGF-1 is a very powerful hormone that has been linked to a 2.5-4 times higher incidence of human colon, [breast and prostate cancer](#).

It is known that [all genetically modified crops have bacterial DNA fragments inside](#). This is because the genes are manipulated by using bacteria. The bacterial DNA contains a genetic portion that stimulates the immune system to create inflammation.

Animal experiments have shown that exposure to these genetic fragments may lead to inflammation, arthritis and lymphoma (a type of leukemia). In addition to this danger, researchers have also found that ingested DNA fragments that are large enough to contain whole genes can remain intact, and are able to enter the blood and tissues. This is a very scary proposition.

We must remember that [the highest priority of Big Pharma](#) and chemical corporations is profit. All other considerations are of relatively minor importance. This appears to be one of the major reasons that these organizations are so adamant in

their push for the rapid introduction of genetically modified organisms, foods and crops into widespread use. But it is a very risky proposition because once GMO's are introduced into nature, they will probably be virtually impossible to remove. We are literally gambling with our lives, and the lives of future generations. This could conceivably lead to the extinction of the human species. Nobody knows because no long-term studies have been performed. This is a critical issue that will affect everyone on Earth.

<http://www.agoracosmopolitan.com/news/health/2011/10/23/1304.html>

GE Food

Reclaiming the Global Food System without GMOs: New Report

Posted on [October 20, 2011](#) by [geobear7](#)

Food Sovereignty: Reclaiming the Global Food System

War on Want: Oct. 2011

The model of food sovereignty stands in marked contrast to the approach of 'food security' that has dominated official reactions to the crisis of world hunger.

Food security, ultimately a defense of the status quo, fails to recognize that hunger is essentially a political problem that must be resolved by changes in the balance of power.

This report introduces the basic principles that underpin food sovereignty. It also presents a number of case studies to show how farmers are already implementing those principles successfully in their own communities around the world.

§2.3 Genetically Modified Crops

The main reason why genetically modified organisms (GMOs) were developed was not to increase crop yields, as the corporations tell us, but to bring farmers more closely under their control.

The huge profits made by the agrochemical companies during the Green Revolution allowed them to fund the next big step in their bid to control world farming: the development of genetically modified (GM) crops. Over 20 years ago, when the corporations began to test GM crops in laboratories and in field sites, they realized that, even more than with hybrid crops, genetic modification would turn the humble seed into the linchpin of world farming. If corporations could monopolise the seed market, they would leave farmers with no option but to buy their GM seeds and all the other products associated with their cultivation. Overnight they would create a captive market.

So the corporations began to buy up seed companies. Over the last two decades they have taken control of more than 1,000 once independent seed companies, so that the top 10 seed companies now account for 73% of the world's commercial seed market (the top three companies alone account for over half). US-based Monsanto has been particularly aggressive in its targeting of small seed manufacturers in key countries such as Brazil. In 1996 Monsanto was not even among the top 10 global seed companies, but by 2009 it was secure in first place, responsible for 27% of the global commercial seed market on its own (see Table 1).

Table 1. World's Top 10 Seed Companies, 2009

	Source: ETC Group	Sales (US\$ millions)	Market Share (%)
1	Monsanto (USA)	7,297	27
2	DuPont (USA)	4,641	17
3	Syngenta (Switzerland)	2,564	9
4	Groupe Limagrain (France)	1,252	5
5	Land O' Lakes (USA)	1,100	4
6	KWS AG (Germany)	997	4
7	Bayer CropScience (Germany)	700	3
8	Dow AgroSciences (USA)	635	2
9	Sakata (Japan)	491	2
10	DLF-Trifolium (Denmark)	385	1
	Totals:	20,062	74

The first genetically modified crop, put on the market by Monsanto in 1996, was Round-up Ready (RR) soya, a variety of soya into which a gene had been introduced to make it resistant to Round-Up, an herbicide also made by Monsanto. At first, this advance seemed to be a real boon for farmers. They no longer needed to plough fields, just douse them with pesticides to kill the weeds. And it allowed them to spray their fields early in the growing cycle as their crop, although still vulnerable seedlings, would not be affected. Shortly afterwards, Bt maize, Bt potato and Bt cotton, all of which had had a *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) toxin gene introduced into them to make them resistant to common pests, were put on the market, also by Monsanto.

The main advantage of these new crops for the big farmers was that they facilitated monoculture and helped reduce labour costs – both key elements in the agricultural ‘race to the bottom’.

It did not take long, however, for problems to emerge. ‘Super weeds’ soon developed resistance to the Round-Up herbicide, and ‘super bugs’ began to munch their way into the Bt crops. The corporations have repeatedly told farmers that all their problems will be solved by the second generation of GM crops, engineered to be more toxic or more pest-resistant, and some of these crops are now on the market. While they may work for a time, pests and weeds will undoubtedly find their way in to the new crops. So another generation of GM crops will be needed: the techno-fixes go on and on.

§2.4 Pulling in the Profits

Even though there has been considerable resistance from farmers in many parts of the world to genetically modified crops, the agrochemical corporations continue to increase their sales not just of GM crops but of agrochemical products in general.

The global South has become increasingly important to the companies, with industry figures suggesting that **the combined sales of agrochemical products in Latin America and Asia have now for the first time surpassed combined sales in North America and Europe.**

In the dog-eat-dog world of corporate competition, companies either buy up their rivals or are bought up themselves. The agrochemicals sector has been going through – and is still going through – an intense process of concentration. By the end of 2007, the top 10 companies were responsible for 89% of agrochemical sales.

These companies have become so powerful that they can push new and potentially harmful farming techniques on to farmers, who in poorer countries are often illiterate and ill-prepared to assess the risks of the technology they are offered. One of the most shocking cases involves India’s cotton farmers. They were strongly ‘encouraged’ to use expensive hybrid and GM seeds, which eventually trapped them in an escalating debt spiral. Some 150,000 farmers have committed suicide as a result.

While peasant farmers, smallholders and indigenous people struggle to stay on the land, the corporations are tightening their grip and producing multibillion-dollar profits for their shareholders. Although distinctions between sectors are blurring as technology changes and the corporations move into new areas, there are still clearly two groups:

the biotech companies, which provide inputs for farmers from seeds and pesticides to veterinary products (see Table 3); and the food merchants, who buy the produce and transport it around the world (see Table 4). Both have continued to chalk up billions of dollars in profit each year, even during the financial crisis.

Table 3 Annual profits of the biotech giants (US\$ millions)

	2010	2009	2008	2007	2006
Bayer	3,778	3,745	4,855	4,903	4,255
Dow	3,160	1,408	1,182	3,691	5,403
Syngenta	1,857	1,804	1,841	1,553	939
Monsanto	1,656	3,092	3,039	1,511	1,317

(Sources: Company annual reports. Figures refer to all sectors.)

Table 4 Annual profits of the largest grain traders (US\$ millions)

	2010	2009	2008	2007	2006
Bunge	3,348	428	1,898	1,554	802
Cargill	2,603	3,334	3,951	2,343	1,537
ADM	2,585	2,500	2,594	3,154	1,855

Now that the world is entering a phase of climatic uncertainty, with increased droughts, flooding and other kinds of extreme weather, the corporations would like us to believe that only their GM crops, which will be specially engineered to resist drought or salinization, can save the world from hunger. This completely ignores the fact that hunger is essentially a political problem, caused by poverty and landlessness. The proliferation of further GM crops will simply increase farmers' dependence on the agrochemical corporations themselves.

Until recently the corporations were careful not to buy up land or get involved in the actual work of growing crops or raising livestock, clearly

deterred by the very real but unpredictable risk of losing crops or livestock as a result of bad weather, natural disasters or disease. But, as we shall see in the next section, this is changing. With the stock of fertile land around the world declining, investors are now viewing land itself as the next investment opportunity.

Food sovereignty entails a radical change in the way society is organized so that power is taken away from local elites, who are so often aligned with corporate capital, and is restored to the people. It means people gaining control over their land and deciding what they will grow and how they will grow it.

It means pushing through changes in macroeconomic policy so that national food production can be protected from competition from cheap food imported from abroad. In this way, food sovereignty is an integral part of the process of constructing participatory democracy, and of demonstrating that another world is possible.

Read the full report here:

www.waronwant.org/attachments/Food%20sovereignty%20report.pdf

Or here: [Food sovereignty War on Want 10-2011](#)

GE Agriculture

Why Is the State Department Using Our Money to Pimp for Monsanto?

The State Department is using taxpayer money to help force genetically modified crops on other countries.

October 31, 2011



Photo Credit: istumating9_11

People in India are up in arms about eggplant. Not just any eggplant — the fight, which is also raging in the Philippines, is over Monsanto's Bt eggplant. Even as increasing scientific evidence concludes that biotechnology and its arsenal of genetically modified crops may be doing more harm than good, companies like Monsanto are still pushing them hard and they are getting help from the U.S.

The State Department is using taxpayer money to help push the agenda of Monsanto and its friends all across the world. Here's a recent example: Assistant Secretary of State Jose W. Fernandez, addressing an event of high-level government officials from around the world, agribusiness CEOs, leaders from international organizations, and anti-hunger groups said, "Without agricultural biotechnology, our world would look vastly

different. One of our challenges is how to grow more crops on the same land. This is where biotechnology plays a role."

Many scientists would disagree with these statements, which are more controversial than Fernandez let on. The Union of Concerned Scientists found that biotech crops did not lead to reliable yield increases compared to conventional, non-GMO crops and that biotech crops actually required more pesticides than conventional crops. These conclusions are reiterated by the scientists who authored the "International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science, and Technology for Development" (IAASTD) report, a 2008 study written by 400 scientists from around the world concluding that agroecology was the best way to feed the world. And a recent 30-year study by the Rodale Institute found that organic methods provided excellent drought protection, whereas drought-tolerant GMOs are mostly still an idea of the future.

So why is Fernandez making speeches that sound like Monsanto talking points? His background prior to working at the State Department was as a lawyer specializing in international finance and mergers and acquisitions, particularly in Latin America. Now he heads up the State Department's Bureau of Economic, Energy, and Business Affairs (EEB), which works "to promote economic security and prosperity at home and abroad." And part of such prosperity, according to EEB, includes promoting GMOs around the world.

Within EEB lies the [Office of Agriculture, Biotechnology, and Textile Trade Affairs](#) (ABT), which has worked to promote biotechnology for nearly a decade, at least. The word “biotechnology” was added to the office’s name in 2003. ABT seeks to address “barriers and opening markets for American farm products, contributing to the development of effective food aid policies, promoting rural development and increasing agricultural productivity through biotechnology.”

Among other things, ABT is responsible for doling out half a million dollars per year in [Biotechnology Outreach Funds](#). This amounts to pennies compared to the overall federal budget, but it goes a long way, as grants are often around \$20,000 apiece, especially considering the cumulative impact of their use in promoting biotechnology around the world each year since 2003. Biotech Outreach Fund requests for 2010 included.

- A [request](#) from the U.S. embassy in Ecuador for \$22,900 to fly five Ecuadorian journalists to the United States “to participate in a one-week biotech tour” to influence public opinion of biotechnology.
- A [request](#) from the U.S. embassies in Brazil and Mozambique for \$64,590 to hold a trilateral three-day seminar on biotechnology in Maputo, Mozambique.
- A [request](#) from the U.S. embassy in Ethiopia for \$5,500 to bring biotechnology experts from South Africa, Egypt, Kenya, and possibly the U.S. to a workshop on biotechnology held by the Ethiopian government.

The requests above were revealed in secret cables leaked by WikiLeaks. While the cables did not divulge which requests were accepted, they do tell the story of State Department employees whose jobs consist of promoting biotechnology around the world. Between 2005 and 2006, then senior adviser for agricultural biotechnology [Madelyn E. Spirnak](#) traveled to Guatemala, Egypt, Slovenia,

Taiwan, Turkey, South Africa, Ghana, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Poland to promote biotechnology.

In [South Africa](#), Spirnak spent a week meeting with “government officials, researchers, private sector representatives and officials from the New Economic Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) to discuss agricultural biotechnology and biosafety issues.” The private sector representatives referred to include Monsanto and Cargill. According to a leaked State Department memo, Spirnak learned that the government of South Africa was planning to hire several new people to work on GMOs. The memo reads: “Note: we informed both Pioneer [DuPont] and Monsanto the following day about the two new positions and they immediately saw the benefits from encouraging qualified applicants to apply.”

The State Department promotion of biotechnology comes from the top. Both Hillary Clinton and Condoleeza Rice before her sent out annual memos to all U.S. embassies outlining [State Department policy](#) on biotechnology. In December 2009, [Clinton wrote](#), “Our biotech outreach objectives for 2010 are to increase access to, and markets for, biotech as a means to help address the underlying causes of the food crisis, and to promote agricultural technology’s role in mitigating climate change and increasing biofuel production.”

ABT’s work dovetails with that of another State Department agency, the [U.S. Agency for International Development](#). USAID’s work on biotechnology has focused on two main goals: developing GMOs for introduction in the Global South and pushing nations in Asia and Africa to write biosafety laws. Biosafety laws, a common theme in leaked State Department memos discussing biotechnology, basically mean “laws that keep Monsanto’s intellectual property rights on genetically engineered crops safe.”

USAID’s work funding the development of GMOs began in 1990, when it funded the [Agricultural Biotechnology Support Project](#) (now known as ABSP I), a project based at Michigan State

University's Institute for International Agriculture that ran until 2003 but was continued in a successor project (predictably called [ABSP II](#)) that continues today.

Like its predecessor, ABSP II is funded by USAID. However, unlike ABSP I, it is led by Cornell University. ABSP II, which is ongoing, includes among its partners a number of U.S. universities, research organizations in partner countries, NGOs, foundations, and several corporations — including Monsanto. ABSP II projects include the development and commercialization of GM crops like a disease-resistant potato in India, Bangladesh and Indonesia; Roundup-Ready Bt cotton in Uganda (similar to the GM cotton already grown in the United States); and perhaps the most controversial, Bt eggplant, intended for India, Bangladesh and the Philippines.

Using Monsanto's technology, Bt eggplant includes a gene from the bacteria *Bacillus thuringiensis* in its DNA. Like the bacteria, the eggplant will produce a toxin that kills insects that prey on it. Bt is a commonly used organic insecticide. When the bacteria is applied by organic farmers, it lasts for a short time in the environment, killing the insects but ultimately having little impact on the agroecosystem, and giving the insects no real opportunity to evolve resistance to the toxin. When the gene is engineered into a crop, the crop produces the Bt toxin in every cell during the entire duration of its life. As of 2011, there are now reports of insects [evolving resistance](#) to Bt in genetically engineered crops in the United States.

MAHYCO (Maharashtra Hybrid Seed Company), which is [26 percent owned by Monsanto](#), applied to grow Bt eggplant commercially in India, but the

application was denied after massive public outcry. India is the center of origin for eggplant, the country where the crop was first domesticated, and home to incredible biodiversity in eggplant. Adoption of Bt eggplant threatened both the loss of biodiversity as farmers traded their traditional seeds for new GM ones, as well as the genetic contamination of traditional seeds and perhaps even wild eggplant relatives.

Now, Bt eggplant is facing opposition in the Philippines, where anti-GMO activists have [destroyed Bt eggplant](#) in protest. The Filipino NGO SEARICE (Southeast Asia Regional Initiatives for Community Empowerment), which works on the conservation of traditional varieties and on expanding farmers' rights, also opposes the introduction of Bt eggplant. (And, back in India, the government of India has now gone on the offensive, filing a [biopiracy suit](#) against Monsanto over the Bt eggplant.)

Given the two decades of State Department support for GMOs — and its bullying behavior toward countries that don't wish to grow them or eat them — the question isn't why a senior state department official is making a major speech extolling biotechnology, but rather, why the State Department isn't listening to experts, including U.S. citizens, who provide evidence countering the usefulness and safety of biotechnology and supporting alternative methods of agricultural development. For a government department that frequently calls for "science-based" policy, ignoring the totality of evidence on biotechnology is not very science-based.

http://www.alternet.org/story/152921/why_is_the_statedepartment_using_our_money_to_pimp_for_monsanto?akid=7803.67407.XmS9vJ&rd=1&t=8

This monthly bulletin is brought out by Southern Action on Genetic Engineering (SAGE), a coalition of civil society activists, farmers, scientists, academicians, and consumer groups of four Southern States of India, viz., Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Orissa. SAGE has been waging a concerted battle against genetic engineering through a series of activities that involve public protests, media actions, seminars, consultations and publication of a series of educational materials.