

# Food Wars: Corporate Trade Agreements Overshadowing Democracy

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Along with campaigns against fracking and climate change, perhaps the largest and most dynamic grassroots movement in North America today is the anti-genetic engineering, Millions Against Monsanto food movement.

Last May and October, as part of a global “March Against Monsanto,” over a million protestors, many for the first time, marched and picketed in hundreds of cities and towns across North America, calling for mandatory labels or bans on GMOs (Genetically Modified Organisms).

In Mexico, a massive coalition of over 300 urban, rural and indigenous organizations have successfully mobilized public opinion and the Federal courts to ban, at least temporarily, the commercial planting of Monsanto’s genetically engineered corn and other GMOs.

In Canada, the (CBAN), the organic food community and environmental groups are protesting against the spread of GM corn, canola, soy and sugar beets, and suing the government over the legalization of a new, highly controversial, genetically engineered salmon that threatens the livelihoods of traditional fishing and indigenous communities.

Meanwhile in the U.S., the heartland of genetic engineering and industrial/chemical agriculture, a growing corps of organic and natural health activists, utilizing state and county ballot initiatives, grassroots legislative lobbying, consumer boycotts and street protests, have forced Monsanto, the biotech industry, and the Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA) to go the defensive.

## USA Food Fight over GMOs Intensifies

Confronted in the U.S. with the inevitability of mandatory state GMO food labeling laws—laws that will likely, as in Europe, drive GMOs off supermarket shelves—industrial food and biotech corporations are in a panic. After being forced to [spend \\$70 million](#), and then barely defeating (51-49%) two citizen ballot initiatives in California and Washington State, Big Food and biotech’s front group, the GMA is facing criminal charges in Washington State for [illegally laundering](#) over \$11 million in campaign donations. The GMA engaged in this blatant money laundering to shield its members, Big Food Inc. and their brands, including Coca-Cola (Honest Tea and Odwalla), Pepsi (Frito-Lay and Naked Juice), General Mills (Cheerios, Muir Glen, Cascadian Farm), Kellogg’s (Kashi), Kraft, Dean Foods (Horizon, White Wave), from consumer wrath and marketplace boycotts over the GMO labeling issue.

Sensing defeat in upcoming ballot initiatives and legislative labeling battles in Vermont,

Oregon and other states, the GMA and the factory farm lobby recently tried to insert a controversial clause into the 2013-18 Farm Bill. [The “King Amendment,”](#) named for its author, Rep. Steve King (R-Iowa), would have taken away the long-established right of states to regulate agricultural production practices in their jurisdictions, likely undermining future mandatory labeling of GMOs, and meat and other products produced on factory farms. A massive coalition of animal welfare, organic and anti-GMO networks, supported by numerous state legislators and state Attorney Generals, led by the Humane Society of the U.S., (HSUS) helped convince the U.S. Senate to kill the King Amendment in January. A similar anti-consumer, anti-right-to-know Farm Bill amendment to nullify mandatory “Country of Origin” labeling for meat, fish, produce and nuts failed at the same time.

## **Frontline Battles in Oregon**

In Oregon, where a decisive GMO labeling ballot initiative will go before voters in November 2014, and several counties have proposed GMO bans, the battle lines have been clearly drawn. Threatened by 2014 ballot initiatives in four counties calling for the banning of genetically engineered crops, the Governor and pro-biotech legislators, in October 2013, rammed through a last-minute provision designed to strip counties and local communities of the right to ban or restrict the growing of GMO crops. [SB 633](#), dubbed the “Oregon Monsanto Protection Act” by critics, is part of the final 2013 state appropriations bill. Specifically, SB 633 prohibits local governments from enacting or enforcing any measures that “regulate agricultural, flower, nursery and vegetable seeds or their products.”

Jackson County, Ore., which had already qualified a GMO ban initiative for the May 2014 ballot prior to the passage of SB 633, was exempted from the Monsanto Protection Act. As a result, Jackson County will be at the center of a crucial community rights vs. corporate rights battle in May.

But Jackson County may not be going it alone. Angered by Monsanto and agribusiness stomping on their traditional community rights, residents in three other Oregon counties—Benton, Lane, and Josephine—are attempting to place initiatives on the ballot that would nullify the Oregon Monsanto Protection Act, and affirm that community rights, not corporate rights, should be sovereign under the law.

A similar battle over community rights and home rule is unfolding in Hawaii, where a grassroots-powered Kauai county ordinance has placed heavy restrictions on GMOs and pesticide corporations, and where Hawaii County (Kona) has [passed an outright ban](#) on new GMO crops. Six counties in the U.S. have now banned the planting of GMOs—four in California (Mendocino, Marin, Trinity, and Santa Cruz); one in Washington State (San Juan County); and one in Hawaii (Kona). In addition, a number of cities and towns in Maine, Colorado and California have [banned](#) genetically engineered crops.

## **Industry Fights Back against Community Rights Movements**

Approximately 1,000 counties in the U.S. have explicit authority in their state constitution to allow and uphold citizen ballot initiatives. Fearing that more and more counties will launch these initiatives, factory farm and biotech interests in at least a dozen states have passed so-called [“Right-to-Farm” legislation](#) designed to protect the interests of corporate agribusiness, over those of local citizens. And in Hawaii and Jackson County, Ore., where there are active initiatives in play, the biotech industry and the Farm Bureau are now

pouring money into campaigns to defeat those initiatives.

In late 2013, the powerful GMA began [lobbying](#) the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA), and [now Congress](#) to eliminate states' rights to pass GMO labeling laws on GMOs. The GMA, according to leaked documents, is pleading with the FDA to derail the growing anti-GMO movement with “voluntary” federal labeling, make-believe safety monitoring, and legalization of the widespread industry practice of fraudulently advertising and labeling GMO-tainted foods as “natural” or “all natural”—steps so outrageous that even FDA bureaucrats appear stymied, given the present level of public anger and concern.

Compounding their reputation as ruthless bullies, the biotech industry and GMA lobbyists continue to [threaten](#) states like Vermont, New Hampshire, Maryland, and Oregon with expensive lawsuits if they dare pass GMO labeling laws.

While heavily-armed St. Louis police were arresting “Occupy Monsanto” protestors outside corporate headquarters, and a shareholder resolution was introduced for the company to support GMO labeling, the embattled CEO of Monsanto, Hugh Grant, [sheepishly admitted](#) to investors on January 28, “We simply haven’t engaged enough at the level we should have with all of our audiences, and for that, we apologize... we need to do more.”

In the same week, [Wired magazine](#) and [Mother Jones](#) both reported that Monsanto is apparently giving up on marketing new gene-spliced vegetable and grain crops (except for dicamba-resistant soybeans and RNAi corn), opting instead for high-tech, and less controversial “marker assisted” crossbreeding.

Other major biotech corporations such as Syngenta, Bayer, Dow, BASF, and Dupont are following this same path, investing the bulk of their research and development in marker-assisted breeding, rather than genetic engineering. As Mother Jones and Wired explain, Monsanto spokespersons admit that they have no new gene-spliced vegetables under development, reverting “instead to good old-fashioned crossbreeding, the same technology that farmers have been using to optimize crops for millennia.”

### Crushing Local Democracy with Corporate Trade Agreements

Fearing the spread of citizen activism, ballot initiative and community rights ordinances, major food corporations and biotech firms, joined by Big Pharma, multinational banks, and the fossil fuel industry, have been single-mindedly lobbying for approval of several new sweeping, [secretly-negotiated international trade agreements](#), the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and the Trans-Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (TAFTA). These agreements, full of anti-consumer and anti-worker provisions, also grant multinational corporations the sovereign right to nullify local, state and national food labeling, food safety, Fair Trade, Buy Local, labor rights, indigenous, and environmental protection laws. In an unprecedented demonstration of North American and international solidarity and online/grassroots action, a broad coalition of anti-GMO, environmental, Fair Trade, and labor activists seem to have [derailed](#) the TPP and TAFTA, at least for the moment, preventing President Obama from ramming the TPP through Congress, utilizing so-called “Fast Track” authority.

From the activist standpoint, the recent victories on the GMO and TPP “fast track” fronts are welcome news. A critical mass of millions of people, informed, determined and united—online and on the ground, locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally—are proving, through collective action, that “we the people” can indeed battle, and at times,

defeat the Corporatocracy and its indentured politicians, PR flacks and media minions.

The growing strength of this “Movement of Movements” provides hope in desperate times, that by aggressively framing issues, capitalizing on divisions among the elite, utilizing the power of social media, building broad coalitions, carrying out boycotts, mobilizing street protests, and engaging in direct democracy tactics that bypass corrupt federal government officials and politicians (by using county and state ballot initiatives), the global grassroots can begin to overcome the dictatorship of Monsanto and the Corporatocracy.

The broader hope is that this embryonic Movement of Movements can rise to the occasion and continue to win over the hearts and minds of the majority, addressing, not only crucial issues of food and farming and public health, but also related life or death issues such as climate change, economic justice, and militarism.

But to do this we must connect the dots between the different struggles, not only struggling for the right to know whether the food we are eating is genetically engineered or factory-farmed, but for democracy, health and sustainability on all fronts. Without campaign finance reform, without breaking the stranglehold of large corporations and the wealthy over the media, the federal government and the judiciary, there can be no democracy. Without dismantling the bloated infrastructure of the military-industrial complex and bringing to heel the Shadow Government of the CIA and NSA, there can be no liberty, nor the financial resources to address our life or death issues.

Without challenging the outrageous legal doctrine of “corporate personhood,” whereby corporations have more rights than the people, Americans and people everywhere will remain disenfranchised.

And without restoring and maintaining a balance of powers between nation states and transnational corporations; nation states and indigenous communities; federal governments, states and local home rule counties and municipalities; there can be no republic. Only a Corporatocracy, an unholy alliance and dictatorship of indentured politicians, media minions, and profit-at-any-cost corporations—driving us headlong toward climate catastrophe and economic collapse.

The battle to build a 21st Century democracy and overthrow the Corporatocracy is a battle we cannot afford to lose.

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