

Monsanto Keeps on Moving Toward a Lock on the World's Food System

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Arguments are scheduled to begin next week before the U.S. Supreme Court about whether an Indiana farmer is right when he claims that the seeds he planted should not be considered under the control of Monsanto, the giant transnational chemical and seed monopoly, through its patenting of the seeds.

Some are calling it a “David versus Goliath” contest but the farmer, Vernon H. Bowman, of southeastern Indiana, told *The Guardian* that he sees it as a question of right and wrong. In that, he is up against the power of Corporate America and the various parts of that power are arrayed against Bowman.

A lower court heard the case against Bowman v. Monsanto, one of the most powerful corporations (St. Louis, Mo.-based) in the most powerful nation in the world, and found in favor of Monsanto. The U.S. protects its corporations like it protects nothing else. It does not protect the individual in the same way and, in this case it is protecting the right of corporate hegemony over a single farmer.

Bowman, 75, who works the same land as his father, bought soybean seed from a local dealer, and the seed contained some of Monsanto’s patented “Roundup Ready” soybean seed, mixed in with other seeds. Monsanto maintains that such seeds can be used for feed, but cannot be used to plant a second crop, which is what Bowman was doing. Farmers who buy Monsanto’s patented seeds must sign an agreement that they will not save seed for planting in a subsequent year, but will buy new seeds every year from the company. They also pay a per-acre “royalty” for using the company’s seeds.

Monsanto typically enters a farmer’s land (some would call it trespassing) and takes samples (some would call it stealing), and then has the samples DNA-tested for their patented genes. If any appear, they sue the farmer and, since farmers are notoriously outgunned, legally and financially, they end up settling for an undisclosed amount with the company. The amount is undisclosed because, along with the settlement, there is a gag order and the farmer is coerced into agreeing not to discuss the case with anyone. Few farmers have enough money to take on the corporation.

Around the world, this is Monsanto’s *modus operandi*. In some countries, where the legal system is not as complicated as it is in the U.S., they work on the country’s business and political leaders and convince them that their seeds will provide better crops than traditional seeds and the company gains entry into the local marketplace for seeds and the other materials necessary to bring forth a crop: petroleum-based fertilizer, pesticides, herbicides and, in the case of their soybeans, their brand of glyphosate, Round-up, which is necessary

for their “Roundup ready” soybeans.

Monsanto has genetically engineered (also called “genetically modified organisms” or GMOs) their soybeans so that they cannot be killed by their herbicide, so fields can be sprayed while the commercial crop is coming up and the weeds will be killed. About 85 percent of corn in the U.S., 91 percent of soybeans, some 95 percent of sugar beets, and 88 percent of cotton are genetically engineered. Much of this material, for which no long-term studies on human health have been done, have entered the human food supply in the U.S., where a significant percentage (more than two-thirds) of processed foods contain genetically engineered components.

According to the Center for Food Safety: “By being able to take the genetic material from one organism and insert it into the permanent genetic code of another, biotechnologists have engineered numerous novel creations, such as potatoes with bacteria genes, ‘super’ pigs with human growth genes, fish with cattle growth genes, tomatoes with flounder genes, and thousands of other plants, animals and insects. At an alarming rate, these creations are now being patented and released into the environment.”

Those who would patent every life form possible (plant or animal) want the people to believe that genetic manipulation is the same as selective breeding, something that farmers have done since the dawn of agriculture, about 10,000 years ago. They are *not* the same. Fish do not breed with cattle and tomatoes do not breed with flounder. These are experiments that are disturbing the natural order and no one knows what the long-term effects of these experiments will be on humans and the rest of the natural world and, yet, corporations like Monsanto are allowed by governments to free these experiments into the environment, as if they knew them to be safe.

The herbicide that is necessary for the GMOs to grow and thrive is glyphosate, which Monsanto patented years ago as Roundup. Resistance of weeds to Roundup is becoming a problem and now, “superweeds” are found in fields where they choke out the commercial crops. As a result, more herbicides are needed to kill the weeds, giving the lie to the company’s original claim that GMO crops would require less.

Another serious problem is that glyphosate has been shown in studies to be an endocrine disruptor, which has great potential to negatively affect human health. One European study connected the herbicide to reduced testosterone in rats, even in small amounts. Corporations involved in biotechnology experiments with crops (and, eventually, livestock) are plunging headlong into their use and governments seem unwilling or unable to rein them in until they are proven safe, if that is possible.

The promise by biotechnology corporations was that more food would be produced and less chemical application would be needed. Neither seems to have been proven true, but the pressure is still on to genetically engineer food and get it onto the market, from the purchase of the seed, to the food on the dinner plate. Whether the GMO crops produce more food or not does not seem to matter.

What does matter is that the patenting of life forms allows a few giant corporations to control the food system and controlling the food system controls a people. It’s not unlike the oil and gas industry, the banking and finance industry, the pharmaceutical industry, and other industries. A small number of corporations control the beef market, the pork market,

and chicken production. A recent report of the Center for Food Safety and Save Our Seeds noted that 53 percent of the world's commercial seed market is controlled by just three firms, Monsanto, DuPont, and Syngenta.

Controlling the food system will give untold power to a small number of corporations. That's why in other countries, farmers and eaters are fighting to keep Monsanto off their farms, out of their fields, and off their dinner plates. In a number of European countries, there is an ongoing battle against GMOs because they want to retain control of their own food systems and they want no part of GMO seeds or foods containing GMO ingredients. In India, there are activists and advocates of food sovereignty (control of their own food system) who realize that their agricultural biodiversity will be destroyed by the likes of Monsanto and its products. They already have experienced it.

At the end of the game, such control, whether it is food, oil and gas, or banking and finance, will provide profits that corporate bosses only dream about now. That's why patents of living things are so important. They give a small number of corporations control over things that should be decided upon by millions of humans and nature, itself.

That is the issue that will be heard before the U.S. Supreme Court in the case of Vernon Bowman. He may not see it as a David vs. Goliath issue, but one of right or wrong and might believe the case hinges on the exhaustion of patent rights, at least in some respects.

It is so much more than that. The main question is who controls nature, and is the manipulation of the natural order of things a proper subject of profit seeking and control over any and all things? The Solicitor General in the Obama Administration did not want the court to hear this case because in the global race for technological supremacy, they feel there is too much at stake in this case.

Apparently, those in charge believe that the patent-and-profit world will go sailing from GMOs, to nanotechnology, to whatever comes next and nothing should stand in a corporation's way.

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