



Peter Burgess LinkedIn Blogs

Monsanto the Problem, not GMOs per se

Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) have got a bad name not so much from the science, but from the behavior of the business world, and specifically the behavior of companies like Monsanto.

Nearly everything in science has the potential for bad use while at the same time offering the potential for important improvement in how things work.

I have had the good fortune to do work assignments in many different parts of the world from very affluent and developed places to incredibly poor and underdeveloped places. This has me convinced that science and technology brings a lot to quality of life, and I want to society to be able to take full advantage of the good things that science and technology makes possible.

Using science to improve the productivity of agriculture is something that should be applauded, and at the same time risks associated with the use of science should be understood, taken into account and minimized.

The problem with GMOs and Monsanto is that science is being used primarily to help position Monsanto as the biggest and most profitable company providing inputs to the agriculture industry. It seems, that in the eyes of decision makers at Monsanto, science is a vehicle for maximizing profit in any and every way possible ... and risk be damned!

I am appalled at the way Monsanto takes control of the farmers that buy Monsanto seed using every trick the salesmen and lawyers can muster. The stories about Monsanto taking farmers to court because GMO modified seed has blown onto a farmer's land and the farmer stands accused of unauthorized use of the Monsanto product. Monsanto, in my eyes, is a huge corporate bully and very dangerous.

Complementing the GMO modified seed is the Monsanto product 'Roundup'. Roundup is a very powerful herbicide based on glyphosate and widely used as a weedkiller from agriculture to forestry to gardening. Glyphosate inhibits the production of an enzyme called EPSP synthase and without this plants wither and die. Monsanto produces seed that are glyphosate tolerant which enables Roundup to be used in agriculture without doing damage to the crop.

It is an open question whether or not glyphosate does damage to humans. Monsanto speaks loudly about its safety, but others are concerned that the massive use of Roundup poses a risk to human health. This is an important question, and it appears that Monsanto is taking every step it can to make sure that it controls the research and reported results about this important issue.

I do not know the science in detail, but I do recognize corporate behavior that signals issues. In the 1990s I did some work for a unit of KPMG, and was surprised to find a little health research group that was funded by a well known tobacco company that put out studies under the KPMG

brand name about how tobacco contributed to good health. Shame on KPMG and shame on the tobacco industry. Fast forward to 2014 and it seems that Monsanto is making it very difficult for scientists to study GMO seeds, Roundup and everything else that contributes to Monsanto profit.

I am aware of the importance of trace elements in food to enable good health ... and I assume that other trace elements in food can have a big negative impact as well. The study of this is not on the agenda of Monsanto or any of the other big players in agriculture and food production.

Big studies are needed ... but these studies are not going to be funded by the industry. Worse, the industry is getting in the way using every possible ploy that the law provides.

I am glad to see movements to improve food labeling to make it possible to identify GMOs in food ingredients ... but I would really like food labeling, or food information to be very clear about all the aspect of the supply chain and for this information to be very accessible. In the end everything is going to be up to the consumer and consumers can only do the right thing if they have the right information and the right motivation.

The food industry is very important, but it is dominated by corporate organizations that really value secrecy ... so much so that they have supported laws in many states that make it illegal to take photographs of food plants from outside the property. Please, what are they trying to hide?

The potential of science and technology to be of enormous service to humankind is being compromised by irresponsible corporate leaders who seem to have no idea of the risk that they are imposing on all of society. I am not afraid of GMOs. I am afraid of Monsanto and some of the other big companies involved with food and agriculture.

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