

PESTICIDE MAKER PAYS FARMERS TO USE COMPETITORS' PESTICIDES¹

Leah Zerbe[©]

Talk about irony. Monsanto, the huge corporation that pushed farmers to plant its genetically modified (GMO) seeds—which need to be used in conjunction with the company's Roundup pesticide—is now "incentivizing" farmers to use its competitors' chemical weed killers. You see, Roundup isn't working anymore. In just a few years, weeds have developed a resistance to the pesticide, causing an explosion of hard-to-kill [superweeds](#) that have put millions of acres of U.S. farmland out of commission. So to keep farmers dependent on its expensive chemical system, Monsanto is now paying up to \$20 an acre to farmers planting Roundup Ready GMO crops, so long as they spray other harmful chemicals on the land to reduce weeds, since Roundup isn't doing the trick anymore. The corporation that trapped farmers into using all of its products, from seed to weed management, is asking farmers to use other companies' products—and paying them per acre to do so.

"It says 'desperation.' What we're seeing is the collapse of the whole system of weed management that was built around herbicide sales," says Marcia Ishii-Eiteman, PhD, senior scientist at Pesticide Action Network of North America. "Ecologists predicted back in the '90s that as soon as you start pouring on and designing seeds for use of one pesticide, there will be an emergence of superweeds. Bingo, that's what we have now."

THE DETAILS: Monsanto created and patented genetically modified, herbicide-resistant crops, and although this system is more expensive, sold it to farmers on a promise of eradicating weeds with little work and less pesticide spraying. In India, where Monsanto also pushed this GMO/chemical technology, farmers facing insurmountable debt after switching to chemical farming are killing themselves at unprecedented rates. More than 200,000 have committed suicide since Monsanto infiltrated the cotton farming system there.

Farmers in the U.S. aren't taking their lives on the same scale, but their way of life is seriously threatened, thanks to Monsanto's antics. More than 5 million acres of farmland are now infested with Roundup-resistant superweeds. Some monster weeds (such as pigweed) develop stalks several inches in diameter and have actually wrecked farmers' equipment. This is opening the doors for other biotech companies like Dow to push other crops through the approval pipeline, including ones designed to be used with chemical 2,4-D, one of two highly toxic herbicides used in Agent Orange. Meanwhile, many farmers are turning to older, toxic pesticides to deal with the superweeds.

"The U.S. farmer is in a crisis that was pretty much created by Monsanto. It's ironic—they're now paying for the competition's herbicides just to deal with the resistance that they, in effect, created," says Ishii-Eiteman, who authored a 2008 United Nations report investigating corporate-driven agriculture funded by pesticides and GMO crops. While 58 of the 61 nations approved the report, which in essence found business as usual is not an option, the United States, Canada, and Australia did not sign on because the report sharply criticized the GMO/biotech sector.

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But things may be changing. Several state attorneys general, along with the U.S. Department of Justice, are looking at the company's practices, including possible antitrust violations. "The system worked for a few years in terms of profit for a company, but it's not working for farmers or the environment," explains Ishii-Eiteman.

WHAT IT MEANS: First off, it's important to note that Roundup is not a safe chemical, although Monsanto brainwashes farmers into believing it is. Only recently have researchers started looking at the whole product, including both its active and its inert ingredients. New research from an international team of Argentine, Brazilian, and U.S. scientists found that glyphosate, the active ingredient in Roundup, produces a toxic effect on frogs, and possibly on the human reproductive system. Roundup has also been shown to cause birth defects in mice. Even worse, the chemicals in the pesticide actually wind up in food, carried inside plants by the surfactants in the Roundup formula. Like many other pesticides, it destroys beneficial soil organisms, including earthworms, that keep soil healthy, nutrient-rich, and resistant to erosion.

"The more you pour this stuff on, the more you destroy the health of your soil, and you fall deeper and deeper into a chemical-based system full of pesticides and fertilizers," says Ishii-Eiteman. Poorer soil motivates farmers to spend more on synthetic chemicals, which do more damage to the soil and...you get the picture. "It speeds you on a chemical treadmill until the system collapses, which is what we're seeing on many farms across the U.S. They're burning the soil by using more chemical pesticides and fertilizers."

Here's how to stop corporations from wrecking our country's farm heritage:

- **Choose organic every time.** There's a hot debate around organic versus local. But if you want to keep your family safe from harmful chemicals and promote a system of farming that's not fostering the spread of superweeds, choose organic. The more you vote with your pocketbook, the more other farmers may consider going organic. Organic farmers are largely protected from the problems chemical farmers face because they keep weed seed banks stored in the soil low by planting green manure and cover crops, rotating crops, and building soil fertility that boosts the numbers of beneficial critters underground. (Of course, you don't always have to make a choice. Buy organic AND local whenever you can.)
- **Write a letter to the Justice Department.** Send a letter to the Department of Justice spelling out how farming affects you. You can raise issues like why aren't GMO ingredients required to be labeled on food, protecting consumers, and your concerns about farming chemicals and how they affect human and environmental health. If you want to be heard in person, speak up at a Department of Justice workshop, open to farmers and consumers, in Washington, DC, on Dec. 8.
- **Read and share.** Maria Rodale, CEO of Rodale and a longtime advocate for organic farming, lays out a strong case for protecting your family by supporting organic in her book *Organic Manifesto* (Rodale, 2010). Even stubborn family members will appreciate the read, and maybe even be inspired to buy an organic apple afterward!