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## Family Farmers Warn of Dangers of Genetically Engineered Crops

National farm leader addresses 1st International Grassroots Gathering  
on genetic engineering, patenting of seeds

by Bill Christison,  
St. Louis, Missouri

[Bill Christison](#), president of both the U.S. National Family Farm Coalition and the Missouri Rural Crisis Center delivered this speech on July 18, 1998, in St. Louis, Missouri at the "First Grassroots Gathering on Biodevastation: Genetic Engineering". The conference was attended by 150-200 scientists, environmentalists, farmers and activists from the U.S., Canada, Europe, India, Japan and Latin America. The gathering was hosted by the Gateway Green Alliance, the Pure Food Campaign, and the Edmonds Institute.



Bill Christison with Missouri Rural Crisis Center executive director Roger Allison.  
Photo by Nic Paget-Clarke.

### Introduction

I want to take this opportunity to welcome our friends and guests from around the world to St. Louis, Missouri. We are here to work on the critical issues surrounding genetically modified organisms (GMO's).

Family farmers have much to lose and little to gain from gene manipulation. We are concerned about:

- Food and safety issues
- Irreparable damage to our environment
- The loss of biodiversity and the inability to use our own seeds
- The corporations' patenting cost involved

We are also worried that customers for our production which are exported will be forced to use alternative products if what we produce contains GMO's.

Multi-national grain corporations say it is impossible to separate clean soybeans from GMO's in order to label; but, yet, they have no problem not mixing soybeans and corn. Furthermore, family farmers do not like signing production contracts of any sort, neither do we like the thought of being sued for using a product we have produced on our own land.

### Biotechnology Conference - St. Louis - July 18, 1998

## The globalization and industrialization of agriculture

We want to thank the Gateway Greens and the co-sponsors for making these important meetings a reality. How appropriate that this first international meeting should be held in the hometown of Monsanto. I am encouraged by the international participation at these meetings. I am sure we can learn much from you all.

Just one word about our organizations. The Missouri Rural Crisis Center is a statewide organization of 4,000 families. Our primary focus is social and economic justice for all. The National Family Farm Coalition headquartered in Washington, D.C. has more than 30 farm and rural organizations from 35 states as member groups. Our purpose is to coordinate, facilitate and disseminate information.

Personally, I am a fourth generation family farmer and our primary crop is soybeans.

A few short years ago, I began to hear about biotechnology as it relates to agriculture. At first, it was BGH which our organizations vigorously opposed. Then, I began hearing about a genetically engineered soybean which would withstand the chemical, Roundup. A product brought to fruition by Monsanto. First, I wondered if this was a soybean that I should consider raising on my farm. The advertisement sounded good ... use a single low cost chemical. The promise was that you could use less chemicals and produce a greater yield. But, let me tell you, none of this is true.

The first problem...they wanted us to sign a production contract which limited what we could do with our production. It is our practice to produce our own seed for the following year's planting. Because the contract forbids this, it would have cost us 3 times as much for seed. And, then, there's a problem of paying for a patenting fee of several dollars per bag. We found chemical cost for our farm would escalate to a minimum of twice as much and we should not be applying less chemical, but actually more chemical. Then, we found GMO seed actually produces a lower yield because of the varieties that had been altered.

Last year's yield book in Missouri printed by Pioneer Seed Co., a seed company with 45% of the market, shows a 5 bushels per acre average reduction in yield from GMO varieties.

A further problem ...we have weeds that are resistant to Roundup already. The acceptance of GMO's by the U.S. farmer is predicated by the fact that farmers are hard pressed to survive financially, and have become acclimated to the idea that new technology is good technology.

There is collusion across the United States between USDA, our land grant university systems and the Monsanto's of the world to facilitate this new world order which will bring about the globalization and industrialization of agriculture.

One of our problems is the revolving door effect at USDA where corporate bosses have unlimited access and serve in important government positions of authority. They then go back to the board rooms of corporations to further exert their influence. It is the mandate of our land grant universities to do research and development on improving crops and better animal production. However, little work is being done to introduce new and improved public varieties. In fact, our land grant university system has become little more than an extension of the corporate laboratories.

Monsanto and other leaders of bio-devestation do not have all of the answers that they need. But, I believe, if unchecked, they have enough power, knowledge and money to totally disrupt the order of nature. I believe, the damage to the flora and fauna of this earth will be irreparable. We can only wonder at this point what the final results of gene manipulation might be.

The narrowing of the species could have devastating impact on food production around the world. This fact has already been demonstrated several times.

The real truth is gene manipulation is not necessary to increase the total supply of food produced and in all probability gene manipulation will result in less production not more long term.

I believe the Monsanto's of the world are the worst offenders of public trust. Only time will tell what the results of gene manipulation will be. It is absurd that any corporation or individuals could believe they have the right to patent life form. Surely, God is amused at their vanity. In reality, these promoters have only a very small percentage of the knowledge necessary to accomplish

their goal successfully.

I think, the renown scientist from the Open University in London, Dr. Mae-Wan Ho, is correct when she made the statement that gene manipulation is much worse than nuclear weapons as a means of mass destruction.

Monsanto has a closet full of skeletons already. A young man who helps on our farm is there because his father died prematurely. The cause of his death was Monsanto's herbicide, Lasso, according to the attending physicians. This product was finally removed from the market.

Family farmers have much to lose and little to gain from gene manipulation. Besides food safety, health and environmental issues, the loss of biodiversity could put us in the position of looking down the gun barrel of disaster. We should not forget so easily the damaging effect that corn blight had on the nation's corn crop a few years ago caused by a lack of biodiversity. We need a larger gene pool in production agriculture in order to assure food security.

Soybeans are the second largest crop produced in the United States. 50% of the crop is exported, 40% of that export goes to Europe, and I know first hand that the consumers in Europe do not want GMO soybeans. We believe, Europeans will be forced to use alternative products if we do not supply that market with clean soybeans. This would bring about increased economic pressure to family farmers in the United States.

Multi-national grain corporations say it is impossible to separate clean soybeans from GMO's in order to label; but, yet, they have no problem not mixing soybeans and corn.

Based on the 1992 Agricultural Census there are 1.9 million farmers in the United States--that counts everyone who has gross sales of over one thousand dollars of production. This is out of a total US population of 260 million people. That means that farmers account for less than 73 hundreds of one percent. The startling fact is that only 333,000 farmers or 13 hundreds of one percent of the population is producing 83% of the food and fiber in the United States. Remember, these are 1992 figures and the impact of our farm bill, vertical integration of the livestock industry and trade policy mean even fewer farmers today.

In Missouri alone, the number of family hog farmers dropped over 50% from 1994 to 1997 with national numbers of hog farmers declining from 207,908 in 1994 to 138,000 in 1997.

Family farmers of the world have the right and obligation to produce a safe adequate supply of food at a reasonable cost for the consumers in their respective country, and for this, we should be compensated with a fair price for that production. We are falling far short of that today with farmers in the United States receiving 37% of parity for wheat, 39% for corn, 44% for hogs and 47% for cattle. The highest level for any commodity is soybeans with only 51% of parity. The current pricing and marketing situation is not sustainable for our farms, families, rural communities, and our food security.



Hogs on the Allison/Perry family farm in Armstrong, Missouri. Photo by Nic Paget-Clarke.

One of our primary problems is bad agriculture policy at the national level. This policy encourages concentration and vertical integration. It benefits the mega corporation's take-over of the production of food and fiber in this country.

I firmly believe, corporate agriculture and gene technology will both fall under their own weight given enough time, but, at what cost will that be to the environment and the people of the earth? We must make every effort to sound the alarm before it is too late.

In the United States, we must make our voices heard in the political process. We must demand our land grant universities fulfill their mandate. We need a labeling law immediately. We must get

serious about providing an alternative supply of clean soybeans to countries that want and need those products.

In this room right now is the nucleus of the power to make these wishes a reality. Our number one priority must be to educate farmers on the hazards of GMO's.

Second, we must educate consumers. We can do this if farm, environmental and consumer organizations would join hands and work together.

The only way food security throughout the world can be ensured is through biodiversity and independent family farmers that receive fair prices for their production along with a fair trade policy.

#### Related articles:

- [Family Farms and U.S. Trade Policy:](#)  
[Part 1:](#) The Impacts on Family Farms of 20 Years of Corporate Trade Agreements  
[Part 2:](#) Citizen Opposition to Corporate Domination of U.S. Trade Policy
- [Interview with Dr. Vandana Shiva](#)  
"The deeper you can manipulate living structures the more you can control food and medicine."
- [An interview with representatives of Japanese farmers' and consumers' groups](#)  
- "It's the ethics of the quantity."  
St. Louis, Missouri
- ["Monsanto and Fox TV Unite to Suppress Journalists' Free Speech"](#)  
by Ronnie Cummins

Bill Christison, president of National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC), is a fourth-generation family farmer from Chillicothe, Missouri. Bill and his wife Dixie, operate a 2,000 acre farm on which they produce soybeans, corn, wheat, hay and cattle. He is also president of the Missouri Rural Crisis Center (MRCC), a grassroots farm organization with over 3,6000 member families. MRCC is a NFFC member group.

Bill is strongly opposed to use of genetically engineered soybeans and has worked actively to develop alternative marketing channels for farmers who wish to avoid using Monsanto-produced seeds. During the 1980s farm crisis, he was active in winning passage of federal credit legislation that enabled tens of thousands of family farmers to reschedule their debts, and has assisted numerous Missouri farmers in successful credit appeals and bankruptcy restructuring.

Through MRCC, Bill has been active in confronting and often stopping the advance of corporate factory hog farming in his state. MRCC has developed the Patchwork Family Farms Project, an innovative direct marketing program linking family hog farmers and low-income consumers in Missouri.

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