Ojai Valley Green Coalition Proposition 37 Editorial Part 2

GE products were first introduced over a decade ago by biotechnology and herbicide companies. They were engineered in the laboratory and grown out to produce seeds with bacterial genes inserted into their DNA. These man-made changes allowed the genetically modified (GM) plants to survive otherwise deadly doses of herbicides. The GM crops allowed farmers to spray their fields, cutting down on weeds. It also guaranteed the genetically modified organism (GMO) producers continued profit and eliminated competition. These seeds were sold to farmers only after contracts were signed committing farmers to buy only the GMO producer's brand of herbicide. Sell the seeds, then sell the herbicide to spray on the seed.

This in part is why labeling GE food products is so adamantly opposed. As so aptly put by Norman Braksick, president of Asgrow Seed Co., a subsidiary of Monsanto (in the *Kansas City Star*, March 7, 1994), "If you put a label on genetically engineered food you might as well put a skull and crossbones on it."

The first wave of GMO products sold to farmers that immediately entered the food chain included herbicide tolerant soy, corn, cotton, and canola plants. These first rounds of herbicide tolerant crops comprise about 80% of all GM plants, and were later joined by another generation of GMOs. These remaining 20% are GMOs that produce their own pesticide in every cell. (These corn and cotton varieties use a gene from a soil bacterium, called *Bacillus thuringiensis* or BT, which was inserted into their DNA.) These patented plants become factories producing a natural insect-killing poison called Bt toxin.

That may sound efficient, but just imagine the rolling miles of farmland now sprayed with herbicides. or occupied with GMOs, that are deadly to insects. These insects play an important role in our ecosystem providing many services on the farm. In addition, the iconic monarch butterfly is in decline with its food plant, milkweed, disappearing with herbicide use, and Bt toxin from Bt corn is poisoning the larvae.

Should GMO producers and users hold rights that trump others who depend on sustainable practices? Farmers who grow crops adjacent to GMO fields have been sued in federal court because their crops (through natural open pollination) infringed on the GMO held copyright of their neighbors' fields and they refused to make payments to the GMO producers.

You may wonder how such a thing could happen and the answer, at least partially, is the rush to corporate profits. According to The Institute for Responsible Technology, Vice President Dan Quayle, chairing the 1992 trade-focused Council on Competitiveness, identified the growing GM crop industry as a way to boost US exports. Quayle announced "reforms" to speed up and simplify the process of bringing GM products to market without "being hampered by unnecessary regulation." Three days later, the FDA policy on non-regulation was unveiled.

The rush has led to what some scientific experts feel are dire consequences. The Editor of the prestigious scientific journal *Lancet* called the FDA position and its refusal to change their stance on GMOs "astounding," saying "Governments should never have allowed these products into the food chain without insisting on rigorous testing for effects on health."

In our final article we'll look at the many health concerns and why knowing what is in our food is so important.