

Why The Green Revolution Under The Microscope Will Fail To Feed The World's Billions

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Now that 94 percent of the soy and 70 percent of the corn grown in the U.S. are genetically modified, Monsanto -- one of the companies that dominates the GMO seed market -- might look to some like it's winning. But if we look a little closer, I'd say they're holding on by a thread. Their current success is due in large part to brilliant marketing. The company's approach was both compelling -- their products were sold as the key to making large-scale farming far simpler and more predictable -- and aggressive:

Monsanto made it virtually impossible for most farmers to find conventional seeds for sale in most parts of the country. Despite promises of improved productivity, enhanced nutritional content, or extreme weather tolerance -- none of which has ever come to market -- Monsanto has only ever produced seeds with two genetically modified traits: either herbicide tolerance or pesticide production. And even those traits never lived up to the marketing hype. But it now appears that the core traits themselves are failing. Over the last several years, so-called “super-weeds” have grown resistant to the herbicide RoundUp, the companion product that's made Monsanto's herbicide-tolerant (aka RoundUp-Ready) corn, soy, and alfalfa so popular. Those crops were supposed to be the only plants that could withstand being sprayed by the chemical. Oops. The super-weed problem is so bad that farmers in some parts of the country are abandoning thousands of acres because the weeds are so out of control, or dousing the crops with ever more toxic (and expensive) combinations of other herbicides. Thankfully, it's an issue that's getting more and more media attention. And now Monsanto's other flagship product line, the pesticide-producing “Bt crops,” named for the pesticide they are genetically modified to emit, is in trouble. Scientists have warned that insects would become resistant from the overuse of BT crops. Even so, when the EPA first considered BT crops for approval, agency scientists wanted a 50-percent buffer to prevent resistance (only half the acreage in any given field could be planted with BT crops). Of course, if that demand stood, there is no way that Monsanto would ever have achieved their current market dominance. Monsanto was so convinced (publicly at least) of their products' immunity from, well, an immunity problem, that they pushed back hard and got the buffer zone reduced to 20 percent. The idea with a larger buffer was that any resistant bugs that arose would breed with the bugs feeding on the non-BT crops nearby, and ecological balance would be preserved. So, by requiring a small buffer, EPA higher-ups were echoing Monsanto's party line: Resistance isn't a risk. Sadly, even that 20-percent rule has been ignored by many farmers, with no fear of retribution from Monsanto for violating safety protocols, of course. After all, the smaller the buffer, the more of their profit-earning GMO seeds farmers were planting. –

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