

To Bob Love, Playboy

Bob, the CEO of Monsanto, who had been with the company for 26 years, resigned in December much to the biotech industry's surprise. Monsanto had been doing poorly for two years (it lost \$1.7 billion in the first three quarters of 2002). Partly this owed to its losing patent protection on the main ingredient of its signature product, the weed-killer Roundup, opening the door to a flood of generics.

But it's also in part because of world resistance to the genetically modified organisms (GMOs) on which Monsanto had staked its fortune. (in 2002 there was essentially no increase worldwide in the planting of GMO crops). until the Iraq war, US efforts to bully Europe into accepting GMOs was the biggest source of Euro-resentment against the US. ("the deal would be this," the EU development commissioner said in January, "if the Americans would stop lying about us, we would stop telling the truth about them.") some European politicians have won elections by promising to keep what they call "Frankenfood" out of their countries. China has banned genetically modified rice. many African countries are refusing GMOs -- Zambia actually said it preferred starvation to them.

In November, the USDA was forced to admit that two "biopharm" crops -- crops grown to produce pharmaceuticals -- had gotten loose into nearby food crops, meaning that people are going to be eating a pig-virus drug with their corn flakes. **Sen. Dick Durbin** has requested a full accounting of similar biopharm accidents, and the USDA is resisting.

In January came a compound disaster for **Monsanto**: evidence that weeds are losing their resistance to Roundup. This is bad enough on its face, but as most of Monsanto's genetically engineered crops are modified precisely to increase their resistance to Roundup (so that the herbicide can be applied freely for weed killing), any degradation in Roundup's use undercuts the potential market of Monsanto's GMOs. This spring, Monsanto delayed marketing of the first genetically modified wheat and grass, and specifically blamed worldwide resistance. So tough has Europe been that this month the **Bush administration filed a World Trade Organization lawsuit** to force Europe to accept Monsanto's products, which raises echoes of the opium wars, Britain's 19th century forcing of China to

accept opium.

This blow-back against Monsanto and genetically modified crops is remarkable. Just two years ago, the company stood astride worldwide farmland like a colossus, seemingly irresistible in its ability to force the world to accept its genetically altered foods. Monsanto had developed a well-deserved reputation as a corporate bully. In several well-publicized cases, its genetically engineered crops blew into neighboring farmers' fields, contaminating them. Rather than apologize, Monsanto sued the farmers, claiming they were growing Monsanto's patented products without license.

Now the landscape has changed radically, and what seemed an inevitable worldwide move to genetically modified food is, if not stopped in its tracks, at least seriously in question. This may be one of the rare cases in which the combined voices of the people are successfully resisting a corporate initiative.

There are many ways to report and write this story: as a straight business story, as a political battle, etc. But one way to bring this story alive might be to weave together two profiles: a scientist – at Monsanto or not – who genuinely believes GMOs are safe and can save the world, and also a leader of the anti-GMO movement. Both are coming from the same passions – for agriculture, for science, for feeding the world. Their differences on this question, though, are deep to the point of theological. And at this moment, the power dynamic between them is changing in an unexpected way.

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