



# Protecting America's Farms: A Look at the Oppression of our Country's Farmers

Victoria Steinberger

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## **Executive Summary**

For years, America has been considered the heartland for farming and generating crops for consumption. Farmers planted their crops each year, harvested and sold them, and saved their seeds for reuse the next year in a natural, efficient process. However in recent years, and in the light of recent political activity, farms have been moving away from their traditional routes as their farmers are manipulated by big businesses. One of these companies is Monsanto, a chemical company behind Agent Orange and almost every Genetically Modified Organism (GMO) on the market. Due to the United States Supreme Court's upholding of the right for the company to patent their seed, Monsanto now prohibits farmers from saving their seed. Monsanto is now a constant and menacing presence for farmers looking to simply grow their crops and make an honest living. The company has sued thousands of farmers for a slew of different reasons, including "patent infringement" and "encouraging the saving of seed." Naturally, it is near impossible for one small farmer to go up against a financially powerful and politically manipulative company like Monsanto and attempt to win. Part of the issue lies in the fact that our very own government system is scattered with various Monsanto representatives that push for the laws they want and reject the ones they don't. Monsanto has ex-employees in positions all over our judicial branch, including one, Clarence Thomas, as a Supreme Court Justice. Therefore, in order to insure the fair treatment of both our farmers and our food, we must take action at both the agricultural and political levels. Policies need to be enacted that give farmers seed options outside of Monsanto, as well as protection when the company attempts to take legal action against them. In the end, the judicial restrictions and the interference of big business in farming both need to be examined and eliminated if the fair treatment of farmers is to return to America.

## The Problem

Historically, the United States has always been one of the largest agriculture-based countries in the world. Throughout its development, America has relied on and benefited of the farming culture that was once dominant from the mid- Atlantic to the Rockies. However, while farming has been a quintessential aspect of the American economy, not to mention the American food supply, recent oppression of our farmers has brought to light a slew of questionable policies related to agricultural activities. Through large and overbearing companies taking advantage of the vulnerability of farmers, we have seen a shift from the traditional, healthy, lucrative practice of farming, to a mass-productive, controlling, and manipulative procedure.

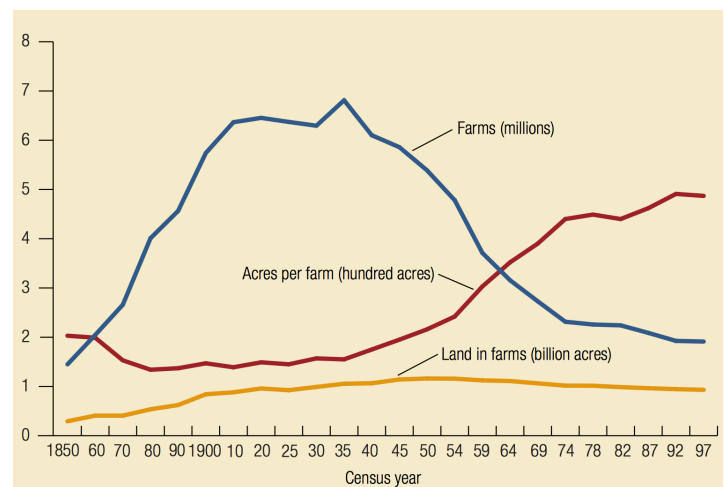
Not only is the current state of this issue a concern for farmers, it is also a potential health concern for us as consumers. The oppressive agricultural techniques being forced onto our nation's farmers have altered the type and the quality of the food that we consume; all due to various meticulously drafted policies designed to protect big businesses.

Due to the nature of farming itself, coupled with the overbearing nature of companies that control most of today's farms, America has seen a decrease in the profession of farming. As seen in Figure 1, the number of United States Farms has dropped at a shocking rate starting in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The alarming decline in American farms has also been aided by an

increase in the amount of land per farm. While this may seem an unusual trend to accompany the decrease in farms, the fact lies in the power that large companies have over small agricultural centers. As more and more farmers have been forced into

Figure 1. Number of American Farms and Farming Land (1850 – 1997)

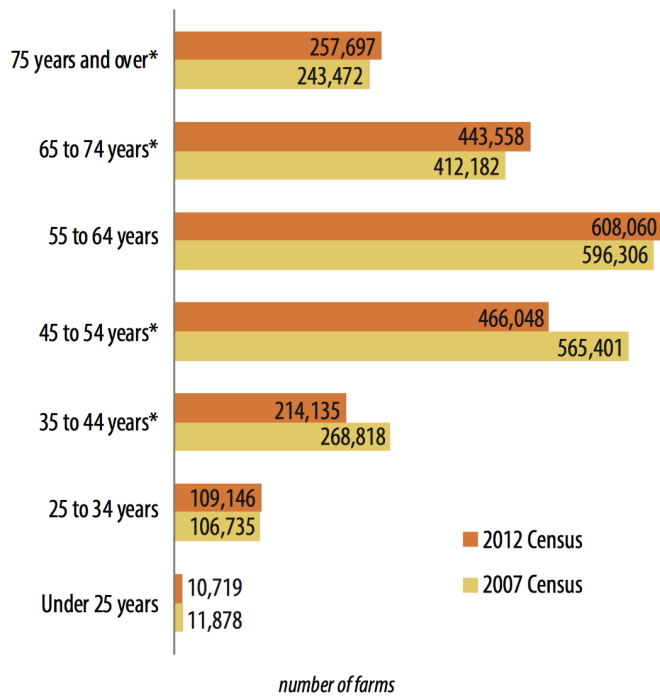


Source: USDA and Census of Agriculture

participating in big farming techniques, more land has been purchased and taken away from small-scale farms.

Figure 2. Average Ages of American Farmers (2007 and 2012)

**Principal Operators by Age Group, 2007 and 2012**



Source: USDA and Census of Agriculture

Likewise, perhaps more concerning still are the demographics of the majority of America’s current farming population. As shown in Figure 2, the larger part of the farming population lies between the ages of 55 and 64. This is a significant piece of data to consider, owing to the fact that our prime generation of farmers is nearing an age that they will no longer be able to cope with the physical labor required to maintain a working farm. Normally, the next generation would be looked to as

a resource for new farmers; however, as shown in Figure 2, there are significantly less farmers in the younger generations to come. In other words, the drop in farms and in farmers can be expected to combine into a dangerous situation for the future of America’s agricultural interests. The current actions that the United States government and large corporations have taken in the farming industry have endangered the practice and laborers involved in traditional American agriculture, and policy must therefore be introduced that returns the integrity to our farmers.

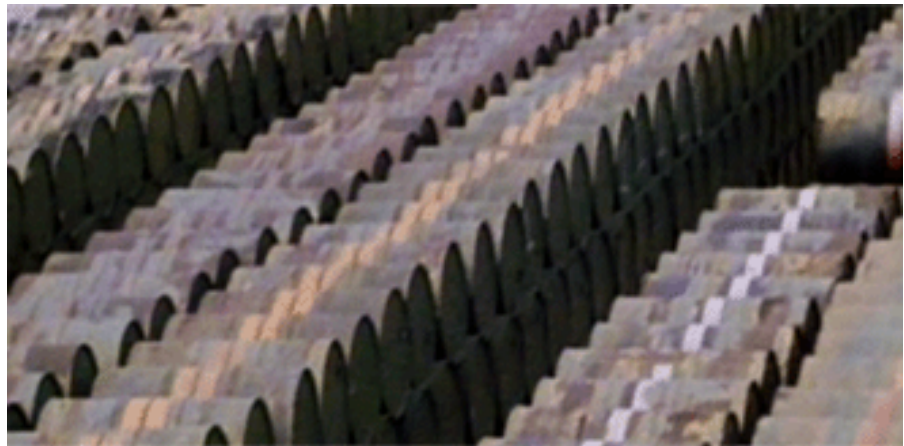
**How Did We Get Here?**

In order to understand the potential impacts and the potential solutions to the issue at hand, the origin of the policies currently dominating our farm industry must first be considered.

## ***The Crops***

When looking into the plant aspect of farm culture, one cannot go very far into the industry without running into the man behind the curtain: Monsanto. Contrary to popular belief, Monsanto is not mainly a farming and seed supplying business, it is, in actuality, a chemical company. Monsanto found its beginnings in the chemical warfare industry, particularly with its use of “Agent Orange” during the Vietnam War (History.com). Agent Orange was used to destroy crops in enemy territory, with the intention of starving the opposition due to their lack of successful harvest. Several studies have now been conducted that connect a number of diseases (including several different forms of cancer) affecting veterans to the dangerous chemical used in Vietnam (Veteran Affairs).

Following the creation of Agent Orange, Monsanto’s next successful and well-known project was the creation of Roundup. Roundup was patented in the 1970s as a simple herbicide (MIT Roundup). Just ten years later, for the first



*Figure 3. Agent Orange was named for the orange stripe on the barrels it was stored in.*

*Source: Agent Orange Records*

time, the Supreme Court ruled that you can patent life, particularly a plant, and thus Monsanto began its complete monopoly over the soybean industry (Food, Inc.). After the ruling, Monsanto created the first Roundup-resistant crops in 1996, which were then dubbed “Roundup Ready” (MIT Roundup). In its beginnings, the Roundup Ready gene could be found in just 2 % of U.S. soybeans; but as of 2008, it is found in over 90% (Food, Inc.). It is this development that truly laid the foundation for Monsanto’s farming takeover.

## **Big Business Takeover: Monsanto's Monopoly**

### ***The Overbearing Company***

Today, Monsanto's control over both farmers and their crops has reached unprecedented levels. A farmer can no longer carry out their business without either being in a contract with or being blacklisted by the restrictive company. Currently, Monsanto continues to exercise its political power over the industry to keep farmers under their thumb. Due to the patents Monsanto has on several different genetically engineered plant seeds (particularly corn and soybeans), they are able to manipulate farmers in legal matters. Monsanto patents have prevented farmers from saving their seeds for replanting the following year. The company has sued hundreds of farmers on the speculation of saving seed, and as Troy Roush, Vice President of the American Corn Growers Association, says, "How can a farmer defend himself against a multinational corporation like Monsanto?" (Food, Inc.) According to Monsanto, the reason for this prohibition of seed saving is to "protect" the research that they do in the industry (Monsanto). However, in the early days of agricultural experimentation, much of this research was done in public universities, and thus open and available to consumers and farmers alike. Today, Monsanto has a team of 75 private investigators roaming the country looking for farmers saving seed and working off tips from a 1-800 hotline the company has set up to report illegal activity. Any farmers that are linked to seed saving are then investigated under patent infringement. Monsanto therefore has a "blacklist" of farmers that they compile for various reasons. Farmers earn a spot on the blacklist not only if they commit an infraction, but also if they refuse to submit their records to Monsanto. This blacklist essentially prevents any of the farmers on it from buying seed from Monsanto, thus successfully eliminating one of the only major remaining sources of certified seed (Food, Inc.).

## ***The Unavoidable Business***

The solution to this may seem simple; if you want to save seed as a farmer, avoid Monsanto. Unfortunately, due to the nature of the overbearing company, it is almost completely unavoidable. For instance, if a farmer decides to not use Monsanto's genetically modified seeds, but their neighboring farmers do, their seeds are often

*Figure 4. Monsanto's Lawsuit History*



*Source: Humanity World Order*

contaminated with the patented gene

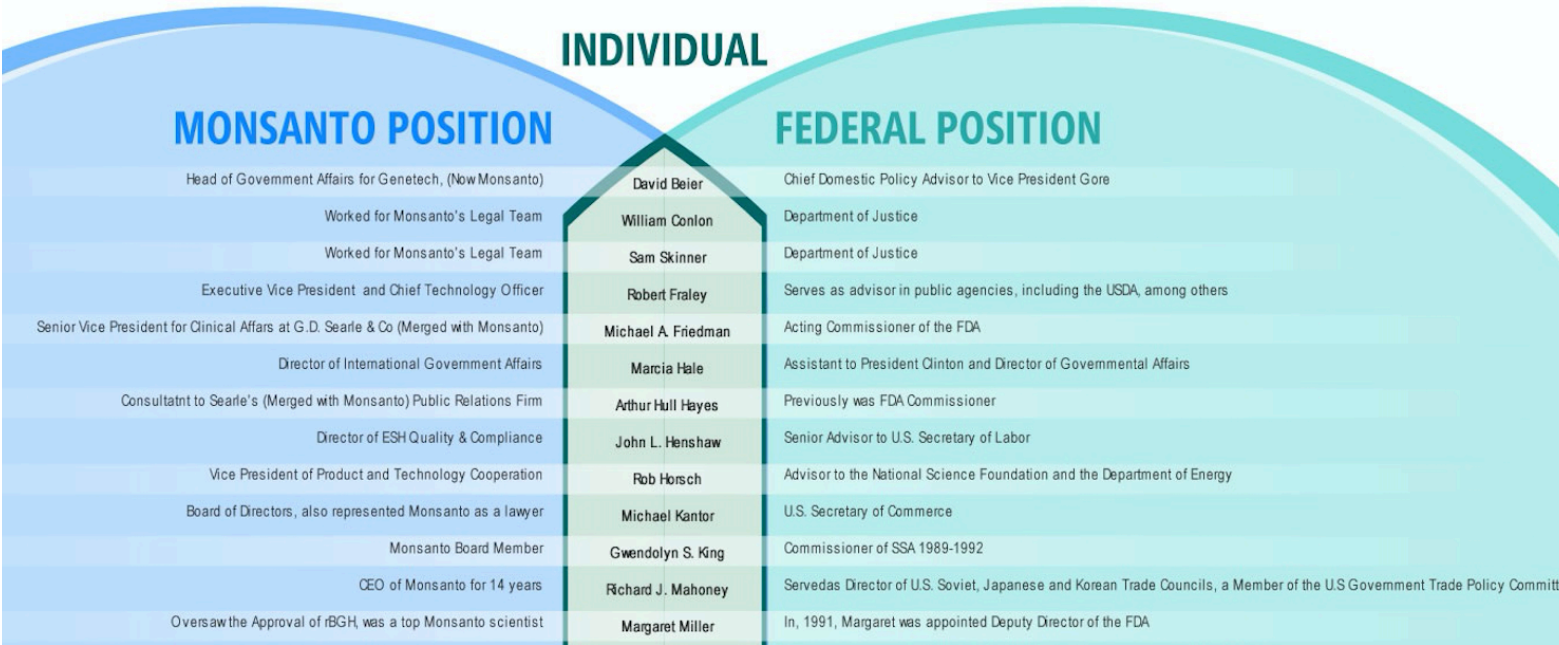
(Food, Inc.). Naturally, Monsanto can't have this happening, so any farmer with plants that have traces of the gene that haven't purchased seed must somehow prove they did not commit an infraction against the company. In fact, Monsanto has been known to look for dominant farmers that don't use their product, and take legal action against them to send a message (Food, Inc.). An Indiana farmer by the name of Moe Parr was sued by the

company due to his "seed-cleaning machine." Parr would clean seeds for himself as well as many other non-Monsanto farmers in the area, so their seeds could be used the following year. Monsanto then sued him on the premise that he was "encouraging the illegal saving of seed." Parr was forced to settle with Monsanto due to climbing legal costs, which had reached an astonishing \$25,000 before even reaching court (Food, Inc.). There is absolutely no way that a farmer can go up against Monsanto in court without going into extreme debt, if they weren't there already. Farmers and seed cleaners like Moe Parr are at the mercy of this ruthless company, and the governmental actions and policies that back them.

**The Political Presence**

Monsanto’s main advantage over farmers is their significant impact over governmental issues. It is often said that there is a “revolving door” between Monsanto and Washington, meaning that the company has several connection conveniently placed in several different positions throughout our government (Food, Inc.). Those shown in Figure 5 are just a few of Monsanto’s most important employees that now have federal careers; those that keep in mind that their last employment was with Monsanto as they carry out their jobs.

Figure 5. Monsanto’s Employees and Governmental Positions



Source: Compliance Campaign

One of the most obvious cases of this connection with politics is with Clarence Thomas. Thomas served as a Monsanto Attorney from 1976 – 1979, but as of 1991, he has been a Justice on the Supreme Court. This is especially concerning because Thomas was the majority opinion in a case that confirmed that seed saving is indeed illegal in regards to Monsanto (Food, Inc.). In fact, when seed cleaner Moe Parr finally entered a courtroom, the judge pronounced, “It’s a honor to have a fine company like Monsanto in my courtroom” (Aid Indiana). This is a perfect example of a farmer’s honest attempt to defend themselves against Monsanto, and their inevitable failure to do so. In addition to the political positions that allow Monsanto to control farmers, Monsanto also has

immense power to skew and reject laws they don't want passed into legislation. In recent years, one of the biggest concerns with Monsanto, that almost all consumers have been made aware of, is the consideration of labeling products that contain GMOs in supermarkets. History was made in Vermont on May 8 2014, as governor Peter Shumlin signed into law act H112, which declares that all food containing GMOs must be labeled as such by July of 2016 in the state (CNN). The law was met with overwhelming enthusiasm from consumers throughout the state, but of course, not all were so pleased with this development. Monsanto in turn sued the State of Vermont for its supposed legal actions against them. The lawsuit is still going on at this time, and it is unclear whether Vermont will be able to ride out this war with Monsanto. While legal action was taken against the state, we must all look to Vermont for an example of how we should be conducting ourselves with this overwhelming business in order to save the future of our farms.

## **The Future of Farming**

### ***The Seed***

In order to protect and aid our farmers in the future, a number of steps need to be taken. One of the most important issues that needs to be addressed is the lack of options that farmers are given when it comes to choosing seed. With organics on the rise at a rate of 20% annually, American consumers are clearly looking for healthy, non-GMO products from their food industry (Food, Inc.). However, with the lack of certified non-GMO seed on the market, farmers are having a difficult time both meeting this demand and doing so without trouble from Monsanto. In order to fix this issue, we must look to our agricultural business to distribute and provide farmers with certifiable alternatives to Monsanto seed. Due to the rising interest in organics currently seen in America, our consumers would certainly react in a positive manor to this development, much as they did with the passing of H112 in Vermont. This is an excellent way to give the voice back to our farmers, but it is only one half of a greater solution, which cannot occur without the important aspect of farmer protection.



## ***The Policies***

The second aspect of change that needs to occur to successfully protect our farmers is the enacting of a law that protects them. If Monsanto does indeed wish to carry out legal action against farmers who save seed, there should be restrictions based on the nature of the lawsuit. For example, those farmers that Monsanto takes legal action against should be only Monsanto farmers that are in contract and that are proven to have saved seed. This is in opposition to the current system of Monsanto lawsuits, where the farmer must defend that they did not save seed, rather than the large corporation having to prove that farmer saved seed. In addition, GMO labeling should be enacted in all states, following the example of Vermont, as shown in Figure 6. This law should be a

*Figure 6. Vermont recently enacted a GMO labeling law.*



*Source: Genetic Literacy Project*

requirement, because consumers have the right to know what is in their food when purchasing and eating it. Naturally, Monsanto opposes this movement because this would expose their products as being genetically modified, and people would therefore not be as likely to buy it. An educated consumer is a danger to the corporation and the very foundation that Monsanto lays upon, and action must therefore be taken to ensure that purchasers are aware of what is happening behind closed

doors. Fortunately, with our country becoming increasingly fed up with the mistreatment of farmers by Monsanto, we can expect to see some of these policies enacted, along with an increasingly aware public, so that one day, the American heartland will once again become a healthy, enjoyable farm center.



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\* A special thank you to the excellent Oscar nominated film "Food, Inc." for being both an inspiration and a source of information for this Issue Brief. I highly recommend this documentary for further information on farming and where our food comes from. \*

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