

From: Claire Hermann <claire@rafiusa.org>
Sent: Tuesday, December 29, 2009 11:50 AM
To: ATR-Agricultural Workshops <agriculturalworkshops@usdoj.gov>
Subject: Stewardship of Agricultural Seeds

Dear Secretary Vilsack and Attorney General Holder:

On behalf of the Rural Life Committee of the North Carolina Council of Churches, I'd like to submit the following statement regarding the concentration of ownership in the seed industry.

Thank you,

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Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." And it was so. The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day...

Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food."

- Genesis 1: 11-13, 29, N.I.V.

God gives people plants and seeds for farming as a gift in the first chapter of Genesis. Genesis tells us God created plants and their seeds, "each according to its kind," called them good, and gave to humans to eat. For generations, farmers and gardeners have honored this gift, tending and improving their crops.

We, the members of the Rural Life Committee of the North Carolina Council of Churches, celebrate God's gift of agricultural diversity and the good stewardship of that gift by generations of farmers. We support just and fair options for farmers and a secure food supply for those in need. We recognize that our actions affect people across the globe.

When addressing the concentration of ownership in agriculture, especially in the seed industry, we consider: Who benefits? What are those benefits? What are the true costs? Who will pay them? Are there more sustainable, appropriate, cost-effective and just alternatives?

The Problem

The science of seed development has documented benefits, but those benefits have come at a cost to our people and our planet. Those costs are too high, for farmers here in North Carolina and around the world. At the root of those costs is the question of ownership.

Corporate concentration

In recent decades, seeds and its genetic material belong to a shrinking number of corporations instead of to

farmers themselves. In 2005, the top 10 multinational seed firms controlled half of the world's commercial seed sales^[i]. A single firm, Monsanto, now controls 41% of the global market share in commercial corn seed, and one-fourth of the world market in soybean seeds^[ii]. Most of these corporations produce not only traditional seed, but also chemical pesticides and fertilizers and genetically modified (GM) seed. Concentration is even worse in these markets. For example, Monsanto's seeds and biotech traits were found on 88% of the land planted with GM seed worldwide in 2004.^[iii]

The near-monopoly control of multiple aspects of production leads to fewer choices for farmers and consumers. Farmers and workers are losing their ability to negotiate fair contracts, buy and sell for a fair price, and make independent decisions about their farms. The rising prices of seeds show this imbalance. For instance, the average cost of cotton was slightly less than \$20 a bag in 1998 and slightly less than \$90 a bag in 2008. At the same time, the prices farmers receive for their products dropped.^[iv]

Genetically modified seeds are sold to farmers with promises of increased yield and pest resistance and therefore lower costs and higher profit per acre. In reality, these seeds deliver increased yield and pest resistance only when they are treated with the appropriate chemicals, which are also sold by the seed company.^[v]

Intellectual property rights

Farmers are becoming the renters of crop varieties instead of the caretakers and owners. The companies own more than the seeds; they own the seeds' genetic codes. Farmers do not have the right to save seeds from their crops for replanting. The largest of these corporations, Monsanto, has collected an estimated \$85 million or more from U.S. farmers for alleged patent infringement – in other words, for growing crops with a genetic code that Monsanto owned, even if farmers had no knowledge that their crop was contaminated with genetically modified material.^[vi]

Food security

Genetically modified seeds were also advertised as a solution to international food insecurity. Although companies have talked about developing seeds that supply nutrients or survive drought, their research has focused on seeds that are resistant to herbicides or toxic to pests. No drought-resistant or nutritionally-enhanced seed has ever been made available to farmers. The famous Golden Rice, which made the cover of Time Magazine in 2000, never made it to market.^[vii] Hunger is a question of a shortage of justice, not a shortage of food, as political instability, poverty, gender, and social factors determine who has access to safe, nutritious food.^[viii]

Loss of biodiversity

God's gift of biodiversity allows us to adapt our food supply to changing conditions and survive in varied environments. Biodiversity on farms is decreasing fast. Corporately-owned seed varieties displace locally adapted and heirloom varieties of crops.^[ix] Biotechnology addresses one challenge at a time, producing crops resistant to a certain pest or herbicide. Uniform hybrid and GMO crops are quickly being outpaced by weeds and pests and have limited ability to adapt to climate change. Biodiversity will be critical as we meet the challenges of the future.

Loss of breeding capacity

Farmers and public institutions are losing their capacity for classical plant and animal breeding. Restrictive patents and license agreements on corporately-owned plant varieties make those seeds off-limits to public breeders. Public seeds and breeds will be needed to meet the challenges of changing climates and new markets.

Conclusion

GMO seeds have not given us the promised benefits: higher profits for family farms, less use of pesticides, and greater food security for hungry people in the third world. Instead, they have increased farmers' costs, limited farmers' choices, and increased dependency on chemical inputs. They have led to the loss and genetic contamination of traditional crops, which are available for free to farmers and which offer the best chance of food security in a changing environment.

The Solutions

Consumers and people of faith can make personal choices that encourage just stewardship of diverse agricultural seeds, including buying GMO-free foods, planting heirloom varieties of seeds in home and community gardens, learning to save those seeds, and supporting farmers who grow and adapt traditional varieties of plants.

We can also ask our elected leaders to take steps to protect seeds and farmers. These include increasing funding for public plant and animal breeding, enforcing anti-trust laws, and encouraging local control over food production.

Public plant and animal breeding develops crop varieties that belong to the public, not to a corporation, and provides choices for farmers. More federal research funds should be dedicated to this kind of breeding.

Breaking up monopolies and enforcing anti-trust laws will provide the competition and choices that are the basis of a healthy capitalist system.

Decentralizing the food system will empower farmers to find solutions suited to their particular land and situation. For example, research into organic and near-organic farming methods involving almost two million farms showed that these methods can increase crop yields dramatically and provide long-lasting benefits in both crop yields and resistance to flood and drought, all without expensive chemical fertilizers and pesticides supportFootnotes !-[endif].

These three steps will provide farmers with the range of choices they need, and increase our chances for a stable, diverse, fair food supply. Farmers must have the right to choose the best seeds and methods for their farms. Public ownership of seeds, more competitive seed markets, and the availability of information and research on diverse methods of farming will all increase farmers' choices.

Call to Faithful Action

As we read in the first chapter of Genesis, agricultural seeds and their diversity are one of God's first gifts. As we work to be good stewards of God's gifts, we must honor and protect diverse seeds and the farmers who tend them. The Rural Life Committee of the North Carolina Council of Churches calls people of faith and our elected leaders to take action.

We call for the good stewardship of the bountiful genetic diversity of plants that feed and sustain us.

We call for food that is produced with justice. This includes just and fair options for farmers and a secure food supply for those in need.

We call for strengthening public plant and animal breeding, enforcing anti-trust laws, and decentralizing food ownership and production so that farmers can find local solutions. These steps provide farmers with a greater range of choices and increase our chances for a stable, diverse, fair food supply.

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<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[i]<!--[endif]--> *Communiqué*, September/October 2005, Issue #90, ETC Group, online at <http://etcgroup.org/upload/publication/48/01/seedmasterfin2005.pdf>.

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[ii]<!--[endif]--> ETC Group, *Communiqué*, September/October 2005, Issue #90, online at <http://etcgroup.org/upload/publication/48/01/seedmasterfin2005.pdf>.

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[iii]<!--[endif]--> ETC Group, *Communiqué*, September/October 2005, Issue #90, online at <http://etcgroup.org/upload/publication/48/01/seedmasterfin2005.pdf>.

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[iv]<!--[endif]--> Sligh, Michael. *Overview of Concentration of the Food System*. Rural Life Committee Meeting. Pittsboro. July, 2009.

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[v]<!--[endif]--> Sligh, Michael. *Overview of Concentration of the Food System*. Rural Life Committee Meeting. Pittsboro. July, 2009.

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[vi]<!--[endif]--> Center for Food Safety, *Monsanto vs. U.S. Farmers*, 2005 & 2007 update. available at <http://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/Monsantovsusfarmersreport.cfm>

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