

# Combating GMO 'fear-mongering' at America's Monsanto

April 8 2014, by Juliette Michel

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The entrance sign is seen at the headquarters of Monsanto, at Creve Coeur in St. Louis, Missouri, on April 7, 2014

At a laboratory at its headquarters in the US heartland, a Monsanto scientist demonstrates how genetic material is inserted into plants, a common procedure still viewed as a dark art in parts of the world.

In Chesterfield, Missouri, outside of St. Louis, the Monsanto biologist wields a pipette and two shucked ears of corn to show how genes are transferred when creating genetically modified seeds.

The process is always being refined at this massive biotech conglomerate, with some 1,200 employees constantly on the search for new inroads in the science.

Researchers can even cross corn with animal genes if they want, although "we don't do that mostly for public perception purposes," explained Ray Dobert, a company official in charge of biotech regulatory policy at Monsanto, who often is tasked with public presentations for the company, the world's leader in GMO seed production.

Labs containing much of Monsanto's latest research in this science remain closed to visitors, who nevertheless were able to tour parts of the facility, and to peer at its greenhouses, with plants growing under multi-hued lights.

For many years in the United States, corn, soybeans and other crops have been genetically modified to enhance their appearance or to improve yield, with no discernible negative health effects on the public.

Genetically modified food has been responsible for "not a single issue on food safety," said Robert Fraley, Monsanto's executive vice president and chief technology officer. "Not a hiccup, not a stomach ache."

Monsanto is the world's top producer of genetically altered seeds, which it says are far more resilient against pests and harsh weather, yielding crops that are more abundant and more marketable.

Other genetically-modified seeds are resistant to herbicides, allowing for spraying that will eradicate unwanted weeds and plants, but leave the desired crops unharmed.

Journalists assembled at the company's headquarters in Creve Coeur, a

few miles from the research center on a recent visit hailed from skeptical Europe, where the public has been far more resistant to the promise of genetic manipulation.

Europeans—and some Americans as well—worry about the possible negative health and environmental consequences of crop varieties whipped up in a Petri dish, but Fraley dismissed such concerns.

The widely accepted belief in much of the United States that genetically modified foods are safe "does not prevent misinformation on the Internet, or ... fear-mongering," he said.

He also rejected criticism that farmers will become dependent on Monsanto products or that they are being duped into paying premium prices for the GMO seeds sold exclusively by the company.

"You might be able to fool a farmer a year. But they are savvy businessmen. No one can fool them to buy a product that does not add value," Fraley said.

In fact [genetically modified crops](#), Fraley said, are more needed than ever.

He points to rising world population, and the need to feed a planet where more people have entered the ranks of the middle class and demand more and better food.

The amount of arable land is finite, the scientists at Monsanto said, underscoring the need to create increasing crop yield per acre of land already in cultivation.

Scientists here also point to the inexorable march of voracious insects, which threaten to devour much of the world's produce—but not, they

maintain, those crops they have genetically designed to repel them.

In the face of growing demand for its products, the company has boasted healthy revenue growth of 21 percent last year.

It plans to spend \$435 million to expand its facilities here and says it plans to add 800 more researchers to its ranks.

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