



bio watch

SOUTH AFRICA

biodiversity | food sovereignty | agro-ecology | social justice

handout



Why march against Monsanto?

The **March Against Monsanto (MAM)** is a protest against Monsanto and GMOs that has grown into an international grassroots movement. MAM was founded in 2013 by Tami Canal, a young mother in the USA fed up that GM foods are not being labelled. Like many others, Tami is demanding the right to know and make choices about what she is feeding her family.¹

Many people around the world are outraged by Monsanto's stranglehold on global agriculture, as well as by its history of dangerous products and the way that it has misled people about their safety. Because of this, the idea of a protest march against Monsanto had global appeal and quickly spread. About two million people around the world, including in South Africa, joined the first MAM in 2013.²

At least 428 cities in 38 countries around the world are expected to take part in MAM 2015 on 23 May.

Although this global protest targets Monsanto because it represents some of the worst products and practices, it is also aimed at other agribusiness multinationals responsible for the globally damaging industrial agriculture system, part of the industrial food system which is the biggest cause of climate change.³ The other major corporations profiting from toxic agricultural chemicals and GMOs are Bayer, Syngenta, BASF, Dow Agrosience and Dupont Pioneer.⁴

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT MONSANTO

Monsanto is a multi-national company based in Missouri, USA. It has facilities in 66 countries. Monsanto sold its chemical products and pharmaceutical and nutrition divisions, and now focuses on agricultural products.⁵

Monsanto was established in 1901 to manufacture the sweetener saccharin in the USA – Coca-Cola was its first main customer.⁶ It soon diversified into other chemicals, making some of the most controversial and toxic substances known, including the pesticide DDT, Agent Orange and PCBs. While DDT is restricted, Agent Orange and PCBs are banned under the UN Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants because they spread in the environment where they remain for a long time, and are highly toxic to animals and humans.⁷

Agent Orange is a combination of the herbicides 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T and was sprayed by the US army in the Vietnam War to kill off vegetation and crops. During the manufacture of 2,4,5-T, a dangerous chemical byproduct was produced – dioxin. One of the deadliest substances known, dioxin caused serious birth defects, cancers and other illnesses in US war veterans and an estimated 3 million Vietnamese who were exposed to Agent Orange. Because dioxin builds up in the environment and in the body, people continue to suffer to this day, even though its use was banned in 1971.⁸

Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) were used as additives, heat transfer fluids, and coolants especially in electrical

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MARCH AGAINST MONSANTO



applications. PCBs have been classified as a probable cause of cancer, as well as causing neurotoxicity, reproductive and developmental toxicity, immune system suppression, liver damage, skin irritation, and endocrine disruption.⁹ PCBs have spread around the world and are found in most people's bodies.¹⁰

From the 1940s Monsanto entered the agricultural market firstly manufacturing pesticides, then petroleum-based fertilisers and herbicides. In 1970 it produced the compound glyphosate.¹¹ This is the active ingredient in Roundup herbicide, its international bestseller. Although glyphosate is marketed as a "safe" herbicide, an increasing number of impacts on health and the environment are being found.¹² The World Health Organisation (WHO) recently declared that glyphosate probably causes cancer.¹³

In 1976 Monsanto acquired shares in a small company, Genentech, which developed the first biotech product – a genetically engineered version of a hormone that increases milk production in cows. Called rBST, South Africa was the first country to approve its use as early as 1988. It only went on sale in the US in 1994.¹⁴ The consumption of milk produced using rBST is linked to colon, breast and prostate cancers and rBST causes many health problems in cows.¹⁵

In 1983 Monsanto's scientists were the first to genetically modify a plant cell and grow new plants with the inserted genes. By 1995 the US government approved the first commercial GM crops – Monsanto's Roundup Ready Soybeans; insect resistant Bollgard Cotton; and Newleaf potatoes. To sell its patented genetic traits the company needed these to go into seeds sold to farmers. From 1996 Monsanto began buying seed companies to access and own the plant genetic resources it wanted. In 2005 it bought Seminis, the world's largest company breeding vegetable and fruit seed, extending its reach into 156 countries.¹⁶ For information on the problems with GM crops and glyphosate, please see Biowatch's factsheet: *GMOs in South Africa*.

MONSANTO IN SOUTH AFRICA

Monsanto set up in South Africa in 1968 selling chemical "crop protection" products.¹⁷ It now sells herbicides, seeds and its patented GM traits, and supplies 60% of the glyphosate used in SA. Even though Monsanto's patent on Roundup has expired, and many cheaper generic products are imported, farmers who grow Monsanto's herbicide-tolerant GM crops are forced to buy Roundup.¹⁸

In line with its global shift to biotechnology, Monsanto entered the seed market in SA in 1998 and by 2000 had bought two major seed companies – Sensako and Carnia.¹⁹



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Monsanto controls half of the maize seed market²⁰ and its patented GM traits are found in all but one of the GM maize varieties permitted in South Africa. Monsanto also owns more than half of the wheat varieties in the country.²¹

WHY BIEWATCH SUPPORTS THE MARCH AGAINST MONSANTO

The chemical and GM products made by Monsanto and other agricultural corporations pose unacceptable risks to human and environmental health. In addition, the corporate control of seeds and the food system makes farmers and society dependent. We can no longer decide what to grow and eat and must pay whatever prices the corporations demand for their products, or go hungry.

Even those farmers and consumers who reject industrial agriculture are at risk of having their seeds, water and soil contaminated by unwanted genes and poisons because these products cannot be contained once they have been released in the environment. The products of industrial agriculture cannot co-exist alongside agro-ecological farming and must be rejected!

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