Big Ag, Big Food, and the Fight Over GMO Labeling

A Modern Pentagram brief Douglas McKee CRNA ©2026

Monsanto sold farmers glyphosate-tolerant seed and the herbicide used with it. Through partnerships with grain processors, it also pursued revenue after harvest. When states moved to require GMO labels, agricultural suppliers and food manufacturers organized together to block those requirements. The American Medical Association's public position gave that effort a medical rationale. [1–8]

From farm inputs to food and feed

Monsanto developed and marketed Roundup Ready corn and soybean traits and sold Roundup herbicide. Its 50–50 venture with Cargill, Renessen, combined Monsanto's seed technology with Cargill's processing infrastructure. The venture developed a process designed to separate corn into livestock feed, food-grade oil and starch for ethanol. Monsanto bought out Cargill's share in 2010 and dropped the processing project that year. [1–3]

In soybeans, ADM contracted with growers to produce Monsanto's Vistive varieties, announced it would crush the beans and market the oil to food manufacturers, and identified Kellogg as a prospective user. The oil trait in this deal came from conventional breeding. [4]

The labeling campaign

Monsanto disclosed lobbying on Rep. Mike Pompeo's 2015 bill, H.R. 1599. Dow AgroSciences, DuPont and CropLife America joined General Mills, Hormel, Kellogg and the Grocery Manufacturers Association in urging Congress to pass it. The House bill would have blocked mandatory state labels and created a voluntary federal program. In 2016, a separate bipartisan measure preempted state requirements and established mandatory federal disclosure. USDA's rule permits scannable links and excludes foods with undetectable modified genetic material. [5–7]

The same industries had already fought labeling at the state level. In Washington's 2013 ballot fight, the Grocery Manufacturers Association routed about $11 million from a fund backed by companies including PepsiCo, Nestlé and Coca-Cola to the opposition campaign. Washington courts found that the association intentionally violated campaign-finance law by concealing the donors. The association agreed in 2022 to pay $9 million and apologize. [8]

Organized medicine was already on record

In 2012, the AMA reviewed Roundup Ready soybeans in human food and acknowledged that consumers overwhelmingly favored mandatory labeling when asked directly. It still concluded that special labeling of bioengineered foods as a class lacked scientific justification. That public position supported the effort to defeat mandatory GMO labeling. Catholic Healthcare West, a 41-hospital system, had already pressed suppliers for alternatives to genetically engineered sugar and publicly called for labeling in 2009. Abbott Laboratories later disclosed lobbying on Pompeo's bill and the federal law. [9–11]

Federal crop support and solvent extraction

Federal price support began for corn in 1933 and soybeans in 1941. Corn entered through New Deal commodity loans. Soybeans entered as wartime policy encouraged expanded production and joined the fixed direct-payment program in 2002. The early programs supported the crop across uses. Corn was already going to wet mills for starch, syrup and oil. Soybeans supplied oil and high-protein livestock meal. [17–19]

The farm and processing incentives worked hand in glove. Price support encouraged soybean production. A 1942 USDA report found solvent extraction recovered about 11 pounds of oil per bushel, compared with 9 by expeller and 8 by hydraulic press. By 1949, an Iowa engineering report described commercial hexane, a petroleum fraction, as the solvent used in virtually all U.S. soybean oil extraction plants. [19–20]

Early warnings and what investigators tested

A 1935 explosion at a soybean oil plant in Momence, Illinois, killed two people. A 1936 investigation identified the solvent as commercial hexane. The parallel with tetraethyl lead is the early warning from workers. Lead additive workers died of poisoning, prompting a federal investigation in 1925. The soybean plant explosion established a fire and explosion hazard. [21–22]

Early soybean studies examined how solvents affected oil and meal and how readily they could be removed. In a separate case, U.S. veterinarians investigated cattle fed soybean meal extracted with trichloroethylene and reproduced chronic aplastic anemia in heifers in 1956. That experiment showed an extraction process could make the resulting meal toxic. [20, 23–24]

Pure n-hexane is a proven human neurotoxicant. Repeated inhalation can cause peripheral neuropathy. In 2025, ATSDR set an intermediate oral screening level of 0.1 mg/kg/day and found insufficient evidence to set a chronic oral screening level. European reviewers called for actual food-residue measurements in the 1990s, and EFSA called for a fresh assessment of technical hexane in 2024. The biological compatibility question is what remains in finished oil and meal, how much people ingest over time, and what repeated exposure does. [25–27]

Monsanto ties in government

Former Monsanto vice presidents Linda Fisher and Michael Taylor held senior posts at the EPA and FDA, respectively. Pompeo later became Secretary of State. Clarence Thomas, a Monsanto attorney from 1977 to 1979, joined the Supreme Court's 2026 majority in Monsanto v. Durnell, which held that federal pesticide law preempted Durnell's state-law claim over the absence of a cancer warning on Roundup. [12–14]

The public record establishes joint industry lobbying, unlawful donor concealment by a trade association, and policy alignment from organized medicine. The case shows how a business that starts with what farmers plant and spray can reach the rules governing what shoppers learn about their food.

Additional evidence from agriculture and food

A jury found Monsanto and BASF liable for civil conspiracy in the dicamba case brought by Bader Farms. The appeals court upheld liability and the 15 million dollar compensatory award. Monsanto also owned a separate food business from 1985 to 2000, supplying aspartame to food and beverage companies and selling Equal at retail. [15–16]

Sources

1. Monsanto SEC filings on Roundup Ready traits and agricultural products
2. Monsanto 2006 Form 10-K on the Cargill joint venture
3. Monsanto 2010 Form 10-K on corn processing and the end of the project
4. ADM announcement on Monsanto soybeans and food-grade oil
5. Monsanto lobbying disclosure naming H.R. 1599
6. Coalition letter supporting H.R. 1599 and congressional bill analysis [2]
7. Public Law 114–216 and USDA disclosure rules [2]
8. Washington court ruling and attorney general's final settlement [2]
9. AMA 2012 scientific council report and adopted policy [2]
10. Catholic Healthcare West's January 2009 procurement announcement
11. Abbott Laboratories lobbying disclosure
12. EPA and FDA leadership records and Michael Taylor career profile [2] [3]
13. State Department biography of Mike Pompeo
14. Supreme Court biography of Clarence Thomas and Monsanto v. Durnell [2]
15. Eighth Circuit opinion in Bader Farms v. BASF
16. SEC filing on Monsanto ownership and sale of its sweetener businesses
17. USDA history of corn price support and USDA soybean support records [2]
18. Congressional farm policy chronology and USDA on soybean direct payments [2]
19. USDA reports on corn wet milling and wartime soybean extraction [2]
20. Iowa engineering study of soybean oil extraction, 1949
21. Historical record of the Momence plant explosion and 1936 investigation
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24. Veterinary field investigation and controlled feeding study, 1952–1956 [2]
25. NIOSH guide to n-hexane and its occupational health effects
26. ATSDR toxicological profile and oral screening levels, 2025
27. European Scientific Committee for Food opinion and EFSA reassessment report [2]