A Special Interview with Michael Besancon - Whole Foods

DM: Dr. Joseph Mercola, DO
MB: Michael Besancon

INTRODUCTION:

DM: Welcome everyone, this is Dr. Mercola. Today, we have Michael Besancon who is a representative from Whole Foods to help us understand their position with the recent approval of the genetically modified alfalfa crops.

It’s just kind of shocking in the light of the fact that the genetically modified alfalfa is modified to use an herbicide (roundup) in light of the fact that 95% or so of the alfalfa currently being grown does not require the use of herbicides. It seems an unnecessary component. One could lightly dismiss this but most people are unaware that it’s the fourth largest crop grown in the United States so it does have significance.

Whole Foods was involved in some of the initial discussions. We have recently had the Organic Consumers Association’s Ronnie Cummins express their position. We wanted to give Whole Foods the opportunity to express theirs.

Thank you for joining us today, Michael.

MB: It’s my pleasure.

DM: Can you tell our listeners what your position is with Whole Foods?

MB: I’m the senior global vice-president of procurement, distribution, and communications.

DM: Would you care to comment on what I just mentioned with respect to Whole Foods’ involvement to help guide our listeners and understand with respect to Whole Foods how the position came about.

MB: The observation on GMOs goes back to 1993-1994. We have been consistent for the last almost two decades in supporting labeling of GMO containing products or GMO grown grains whatever that is.

The issue around alfalfa is we work with a number of other companies in the industry as well as other retailers to do what we could to influence the Department of Agriculture to not approve the unlimited use of the GMO-modified alfalfa.

As we get down to the every end, we discovered that there were going to be only two options. One was a hundred percent deregulation or what I think was probably erroneously referred to as a coexistence policy where GMO alfalfa would be grown as well as conventional or organic alfalfa.
What we were presented with were two options. We did our best to get the lesser of the two evils which was some protection for seed, some protection for conventional and organic farmers. In the end, that was fruitless. We were unable to move the machinery to get what we thought was a last ditch effort and the best case that we could with what was presented to us.

**DM:** Were you actually present at those meetings?

**MB:** I was not but the CEO and co-CEO Walter Robb, as well as the CEOs of Stonyfield, Organic Valley and other companies were in those meetings as well as some other representatives of Whole Foods markets.

**DM:** Do you have any speculation as to why they chose to ignore the recommendation they initially agreed to, at least the government?

**MB:** Why the government refused to acknowledge it or to accept it? I think because the policy of the government at this time appears to be that there is no differentiation between a genetically modified feed and crop and a conventional organic one and that there is no harm. That’s their position. We feel that it’s certainly the right of the consumer to know what’s been grown with genetically modified seeds or processed with genetically modified ingredients.

**DM:** What ongoing effort is Whole Foods committed to with respect to helping consumers identify what foods contain GMO? Do you have a policy to exclude them from your store?

**MB:** It’s almost impossible currently to exclude from any product because those crops that are out there; corn, canola, soy are ubiquitous. They are in many, many products. We have taken the tactic that we should support. We were founding members of the Non-GMO Project with the intent of labeling products as containing no more than 0.9% GMO, the contaminant, because there is the pollen drift that is contaminating everything.

What really we’re looking for has happened has happened with rBST is that when the consumers didn’t want the product and didn’t buy it, in California for instance, the predominant milk is without RBST. That's because the consumers voted and the market controlled that ingredient, controlled that process.

What we’re hoping is that with the Non-GMO Project, with the certification of ingredients in a product being non-GMO that the consumers will vote. The consumers will make their voices known both with their pocketbooks and their purchase but also with speaking to their representatives wherever they may be.

The one that we think that we can do the best -- we have committed to it with our private label product. We are committed to encouraging everyone in the industry that sells
natural or organic products to label their products through the Non-GMO Project as certified.

**DM:** We have to update our listeners as to what the current status is or where you are in that process of identifying the foods that are being sold at Whole Foods whether they’re part of the Non-GMO Project?

**MB:** There is a lot of products in the market regardless of whether it’s a Whole Foods market or anywhere else that has a label on it that says non-GMO. We were concerned about that because there was no auditing agency for that. That’s why we supported the Non-GMO Project as we have with organic certification, the various gluten free certification.

You need somebody that’s a third party that is saying that they have done the audit and there is no more than 0.9% contamination from GMO organism. That’s really what we’re pushing.

**DM:** I’m just still a bit unsure as to what the process is as to when the typical consumer can go into a Whole Foods market and be able to differentiate between the foods there.

**MB:** That would be the seal on the product, the Non-GMO Project certified. That’s like the government, the USDA…

**DM:** The USDA seal.

**MB:** The seal on organic.

**DM:** So it’s really being left up to the manufacturers to go through the process of having their foods certified then having that label included on their food.

**MB:** That’s correct. As well as with our own.

**DM:** Sure. What percentage of the food do you sell at your stores are your own brand?

**MB:** It depends on the category because it can be 16 to 25 percent.

**DM:** So it’s significant. I believe the volume of food you sell annually is somewhere about 8 billion dollars or so?

**MB:** It’s approaching 10. But you have to also consider the fact that outside of those, you know, canola, soy, cotton, corn -- you don’t get much cotton in food other than some cotton oil that might be in somebody’s product. There are currently hundreds or thousands whatever of organisms that have not been modified. The consumer making the choice to buy organic and to buy products that are labeled and certified non-GMO hopefully will give us a choice and create a consideration of continuing with any given crop as a GMO crop.
DM: I'm still curious, about 25% of the food you sell is your own store brand, approximately, as you said, it depends on the category of food but just roughly in that ballpark. Where is Whole Foods with respect to labeling the foods as non-GMO in the process?

MB: All the private labeled products are going through the audit processes; organic and natural.

DM: When do you anticipate that process being completed?

MB: It will take a year or more.

DM: So we’re looking at some time in mid-2012?

MB: Something like that. You have a lot of products, a lot of ingredients. It becomes extremely complex. So what you do is you target those that are obvious. There are many that don’t need a certification today because they’re not genetically modified to begin with. Broccoli doesn’t need to be certified today because it doesn’t have a GMO component potentially unless it comes out tomorrow. It’s possible.

DM: That’s a good point but the typical consumer wouldn’t necessarily know that so will there be some type of labeling to inform the consumer that this is the case?

MB: I think that the intention is to do all of them. I’m saying…I’m directing it. The intention is to do all of it but you want to do is you want to get to the ones that have the greatest potential first. It’s like when people were labeling products oil free and there was never any oil in the product to begin with. You don’t want to make statements like that, you know, it’s obvious. It’s oil free or it’s salt free or whatever. It never intended any, you know, there weren’t going to be in. So if there is a crop whether it’s peas or corn -- not corn because corn is an issue -- but many of the other products are not in question.

DM: It would seem that would be a relatively easy part of the equation if they at this point in time whatever those products or crops were are not GMO then they could just get a label right away and that would inform the consumer. Because even though it’s not a threat to them the consumer doesn’t know that.

MB: You are correct. There are some economics involved because there are labels. When the labels are running down then you make that change.

DM: Right sure.

MB: That’s why it goes through that process.
DM: One wants to be somewhat efficient in the resources and not waste your labels that are already printed of course.

MB: And waste the labels and to have authenticity in the certification that actually has to have the audit process. As we ramp up with the Non-GMO Project is supported by other packaged food producers then there will be more auditors and that process can be expedited. We’re in the beginning stages of this. We’re looking for support from the manufacturers. Honestly, we’re looking for support from your listeners to buy those products that have been certified.

DM: We probably have one of the largest group in the United States with respect to informed consumers making that choice that’s why I think this conversation is so crucial because they really need the information to make an educated choice.

Right now they just don’t really have the tools because of relatively sophisticated not necessarily marketing but manipulation by Monsanto through the Federal government and basically eliminating the labeling of certain foods and making it actually nearly illegal to put a label on it as not containing GMO without some type of government warning.

MB: As you know in the beginning with the rBST you weren't allowed to label it rBST; milk produced without the rBST. We're not in that place currently. We would certainly not like to be in that place. The greatest alternative for your listeners at this time is to buy organic because that’s your safest bet. If it’s certified organic it has been grown without genetically modified feed.

That’s been my position for the better part of the decade on a personal level is I would buy organic. That assures me as much as one can be assured in this world that what I’m getting is a product that was grown without the genetically modified feed.

DM: There are a number of certifications for organic also, the USDA of course being one. I’m wondering if you could just comment on those different certifications and the ones that Whole Foods uses.

MB: There is (indiscernible 16:26). There is organic (indiscernible 16:29). There are a lot of different organizations. I can’t speak about any one of them individually other than that they are all reviewed for their authenticity and for their accuracy. That’s something that we do, we would audit a great deal particularly on fresh produce.

DM: If your audit doesn’t confirm that there is a certification process that’s up to standards then you don’t accept that label in your store?

MB: Then you wouldn’t accept that label on the store.

DM: That’s the current policy of Whole Foods?
**MB**: Correct.

**DM**: It certainly sounds like a good approach and a reasonable process. Of course with a multi-billion dollar company and hundreds of millions or billions of dollars for the food industry, this process doesn’t happen overnight. It’s going to take some time. It sounds like we’re moving in the direction to give consumers the power they need to make an educated choice and really shift the situation around to more what is currently present in Europe.

I think that pretty much sums up what we wanted to review just to get a really thorough understanding of what had happened and transpired and really clear up some of the confusion that it appears that the Organic Consumer Association was creating with their campaign.

I think both parties seem to be well intentioned. Looking at it from an overview, it seems that we would have the same end goal and it seems somewhat foolish to be divisive when we can really work together to achieve the goal.

**MB**: What’s the term when you kill your siblings? If you kill your siblings, if you kill the people and you’re saying family, you know, we should be together on this issue. We shouldn’t be attacking each other. We do, as you point out, have the same ultimate goals.

I have talked to the folks at OCA and encouraged them to attack the people who need to be attacked and not the people who are on your side. Even if you get down to just a practical business part of it, our business survival requires the integrity of these products. We certainly wouldn’t join with Monsanto.

**DM**: Sure. One of the Organic Consumers Association’s concern was what appears from their perspective to be somewhat of a deceptive practice where the typical consumer from their perspective is going into the Whole Foods market with the understanding that they provide a higher quality product and really in many ways is setting the standard for the contemporary United States food store and really leading the field from most people’s observations.

The concern is that the thought is that most of the items they are going to be purchasing there are going to be healthier and there really isn’t a significant effort being done to differentiate the healthier organic brands versus the ones that are more traditional. That’s my understanding of the concern. I’m wondering if you can comment on that.

**MB**: The push for the company from procurement which is my area is to increase the amount of organic in every category. Fifty-three percent of our total sales in produce are organic now. There are products that are not available year round.

There are a lot of reasons why it’s only 53%. There are apples you can’t buy on the East Coast because of the growing conditions but we keep pushing that and there are
also supply issues. People want strawberries year round. If we don’t have strawberries, they’re going down the street. We need to be able to supply what the consumer is asking for.

The push is for organic. Our top compete in meetings with vendors are always towards the organic and organic ingredients. One, that’s our business and two, that’s our mission. Our first core value is to sell the highest quality natural and organic food available.

My personal mission has been for 40 years of being in the industry is to provide those foods to as many people as possible at the best price possible. That’s (indiscernible 22:34)

DM: I guess the concern since the food category that is most appropriate here is the produce. If you go typically into the produce department which I think for most people listening is the most important section of the grocery store, you really need to be a discerning consumer to differentiate between the organic versus the conventional. I mean it’s there but you have to look really carefully. You just can’t blindly pick up a cucumber without looking and examining whether it’s conventional or organic. That has been my experience.

MB: That’s absolutely true. I believe and I have always believed personally and I think it’s a company position is that while we do our diligence and we sign the product, we don’t want the consumer to abdicate their own personal responsibility for knowing what it is they’re buying. I don’t want to be in that position personally. I want folks to be aware and if they are aware, then they will make the choices that work for them and hopefully those choices will be organic.

Look at what we have done with seafood rating, with rating products in the case on their sustainability, and telling people that the product is read and not sustainable and that we’re going to be eliminating that product over time is I think a fairly courageous position for a food retailer to take, the same thing with the meat.

We’ve just announced the five step program on our beef, chicken and pork. Those are all designed to move the continuum forward for in that case animal compassion as well as the condition that the ingredients whatever the feed and all of that towards organic and towards as clean as possible.

We’re doing the same thing with the Non-GMO Project. We’ll do the same thing in pushing the vendors towards organic and featuring organic. I think we’re doing pretty good job of providing the consumer with an alternative. Well, it say more.

DM: Exactly, I don’t think anyone could argue the fact that on a nationwide basis, if you’re going to seek out healthy foods, the best place to go is Whole Foods, as a brand. I mean, there is no brand that beats you. You have really achieved the pinnacle of that
perspective. You’re most in the major markets so it’s relatively easy to find a place to acquire good food.

The challenge, I’m not sure that I understand that you have addressed it is it’s there. It’s in the store but I think it could be made a lot easier that the identification of conventional versus organic. Typically, it’s a small little a word that you really have search for rather than it being something that’s really obvious. I think that many people are confused because it's not clear.

**MB:** There are regulations because we’re a certified organic retailer. There are regulations for how you put the produce on the stand and write down what can be adjacent to the product. You can’t have an organic and a conventional apple touching each other. So you have to have a break.

It’s isn’t as difficult in my mind to discern the organic in produce because it is signed organic and it is signed conventional. It is signed local. In fact, at some point we have a forest of signs. If anything, you were trying to communicate too much, that becomes confusing because there is so much messaging going on.

But there is also on most organic produce, there is a band on the greens or there is a sticker on the fruit identifying it as organic as well as the signage. Again, I want people to look.

**DM:** So those are key pointers if you’re looking for produce. Say, you have celery, if it’s an organic celery, it’s going to have an organic label around it or a wire wrap. If it’s a piece of fruit, it will have an organic sticker and some of the vegetables will have them also. That’s another good way to differentiate between the two.

**MB:** You have to pay attention. You can’t go in blindly. That’s why I don’t want the consumer to not read labels, to not look at signs. I want them to take responsibility for that person. On a personal level I think that that would be a company policy. You can’t deluded if you’re eyes are open.

**DM:** That’s terrific. I thank you for enlightening us as to Whole Foods' position and also for being a representative of Whole Foods' commitment to really educating the consumer so that we can make a difference and vote with our pocketbook which is really one of the most powerful economic positions that we can take that would really influence the industry in the right direction.

**MB:** I couldn’t agree more. The issue here is that the market and the consumer’s choice can change policy and it will change policy faster than anything that we could do as an industry. So whether you’re buying at Whole Foods or you’re buying in a conventional store, buy organic and support the Non-GMO Project certified product.
A Special Interview with George Siemon - Organic Valley

DM: Dr. Joseph Mercola, DO
GS: George Siemon

INTRODUCTION:

DM: Welcome everyone, this is Dr. Mercola. We have George Siemon from Organic Valley who is with us today to discuss their position on the recent foray that has occurred with the genetically modified labeling primarily related to the alfalfa crop that the USDA just recently allowed to all be genetically modified despite the fact that 95% of the alfalfa does not require the use of herbicides.

Thank you for joining us today, George.

GS: It’s my pleasure. It’s a serious subject.

DM: Absolutely. Perhaps you can describe to our listeners your position within Organic Valley.

GS: I’m the CEO of Organic Valley. I’m one of the founding farmers. Now, I have the big job of running a farmer cooperative that serves the nation with organic products.

DM: For those of our listeners who aren’t familiar with Organic Valley can you tell us a little bit about the company and how big you are, the type of products that you sell?

GS: We’re an organic farmer cooperative that started in Wisconsin and has grown to be a national network of producers. We now have close to 1700 farmers in 30-some States. We’re specializing in dairy products but we also have soy products and meat products and eggs and juice and produce. We have the Organic Valley brand as our primary brand but we also have organic dairy farm meat products.

DM: Thank you. It sounds like a wonderful process that you have put together. You are independently owned, you’re not bought out by some other large corporation, some food corporation?

GS: We’re one of the few independent companies left. We started in 1988. We’re a hundred percent owned by our farmers and all decisions are made by our farmer owners.

DM: I’m glad to see that because there seems to be a trend where a large number of the companies who really start out well intentioned and with high ideals and commitments and goals wind up being bought by these conventional food processing companies. I really tend to challenge the intentions of the original founders.
GS: There’s definitely been a big change over the years. You see all that change. While we share some of the (indiscernible 2:44) it’s kind of a natural progression. We have the pioneers that either get weary or whatever that end up selling out. It’s sure have been a big change.

DM: My guess is because you’re the CEO of the company that you are actually able to sit in on the discussions with the United States government with respect to their position on GMO alfalfa?

GS: Yeah. First off, we’ve been a major participant in all the lawsuits trying to stop GE products. Alfalfa was the first time with The Center for Food Safety in the lead. We provided a lot of funding as well as legal support and farmer support to actually stop this onslaught of GE products.

As you know, we actually had to bring it all the way up to the Supreme Court. Out of that, the Department of Agriculture, for the first time, said they’re going to introduce something more than deregulation. They put forward a proposal to deregulate with conditions which was still deregulating and still not a happy result.

But because they were willing to consider finally any limitations, they invited a group of people that were involved in lawsuits in all sides of the fence to get together and propose that maybe there was some need for limitations on a deregulation. I was invited to that. Out of that, I was part a working group that tried to see what limitations could be put on if alfalfa was to be deregulated. What limitations could be put on it to protect the seeds, to also reimburse farmers for damage.

So from the beginning it was a compromise decision where they were making it clear that it was going to be deregulated now still we consider limitations.

DM: It seems like it was merely a token gesture that they invited you because the end result was, for everyone listening of course, is that they ignored any discussions and essentially did whatever they wanted to and really seem they capitulated to Monsanto’s wishes.

GS: You got to understand how influential Monsanto and the biotechnology community is in DC. They basically have the city owned. Secretary Vilsack was sincere in his efforts. The powers that be were never going to allow him to enact that, so yes. In the long run it was meaningful in that we tried to widen the crack to stop this crack in the dam, to stop this onslaught but in the long run the political power of the biotechnology community is definitely very powerful.

DM: Thank you for your observations on that. I really think that there is -- I mean, it is what it is. At this point, I would like to have the opportunity to explain to our listeners what Organic Valley is doing with respect to certification because it really seems the key to this and especially with non-GMO project is to really identify products that are essentially not contaminated with GMO through this process and really give consumers
the opportunity to make an intelligent choice. I’m wondering where Organic Valley is in
that process.

**GS:** The critical part of any concern about GE is with the seeds. We’ve been sponsoring
for several years now seed forms amongst the organic seed producers to start testing
for GE and to unify and rally around what do we need to do to protect our seed sources.

Right now our coop has a policy where we’re requiring our farmers to not only use
organic seeds but to also be testing it for GE contamination. We’re starting with that
basic level of seeds because that’s a critical thing. And then after that of course,
organics doesn’t allow GE products, any manufactured products.

The seed is the largest place of contamination so that’s where we put the bulk of our
focus. We have enrolled our soy program into the non-GMO project. We’re still finalizing
the program. The rest of the program is for non-GMO for dairy and eggs and that kind of
thing.

**DM:** It’s interesting that your company produces soy. I’m not a big fan of it but my
understanding is about somewhere between 93 and 95 percent of the soy crop is
currently GMO?

**GS:** Yes.

**DM:** What percentage of the remainder is produced through Organic Valley?

**GS:** We’re just a little teeny amount of it. Soy is not our primary interest but we have
some soy producers in Iowa who came to us. We’re producing soybeans in Iowa
organic and making our soy beverage drink. Again, we’re testing all that for GE
contamination as well.

**DM:** What are the other big products that you produce outside of dairy?

**GS:** Eggs is number two and then after that probably the diverse meat products have
are probably number three. We have an orange juice program as well as the produce
program. These are farmer owner supplies and everything we do and sell 99% is all our
farmer owner’s products.

**DM:** Excellent. With respect to the eggs, obviously they’re not CAFO (Concentrated
Animal Feeding Operations). Can you describe to our listeners how the eggs are
produced through the chickens that you’re raising?

**GS:** Our eggs are on family farms that are probably in the Midwest. They range around
5000 birds. I myself have a farm. I have 2500 bird house. We have some houses that
are bigger but on the average they’re around that size. We have standards that are
above any of the other organic standards where we of course require access to
outdoors. We have square footage inside and of course natural light.
We definitely have a strong standard. We’re still what you call a commercial production. We have 2000 hens in the house but that’s compared 80,000 hens in a house. We’re certainly not the backyard 10 hens but we’re certainly not the big large CAFOs as you spoke of.

**DM:** Do the chickens in these operations have the opportunity to eat insects on the ground?

**GS:** We have access to outdoors. Our producers definitely have complied by that. Some I would say comply really well. We’re actually going through a process right now and review all our standards in how to increase -- more and more organic principles into the production. Organics is always an act of getting better. It’s something that we’re working on right now.

**DM:** I’m wondering too that one of the confusing labels on organic eggs is the omega-3 component. There have been some experts who have raised concerns that animals, the chicken specifically are fed these higher amounts of omega-3s may actually be somewhat of a challenge with the eggs they produce because they tend to be a little more perishable, these fats and then they can be oxidized. I’m wondering does the standards that are Organic Valley’s have anything related to the type of feed that they’re eating other than the (indiscernible 10:38) of course?

**GS:** In order to produce our omega eggs, we’re feeding a flax protein. It’s a small amount of flax and we’re able to get the achieved levels we want. I’m not aware of the controversy you just spoke of but we just get omega by feeding flax. We’re not feeding any synthetic additives or anything like that. We’re just feeding some flax protein and that’s able to get them the omega level that we put on the carton.

**DM:** I think that pretty much covers the questions I had. Do you have any final comments that you want to give to our listeners?

**GS:** You know the GE alfalfa just shows again the power of the biotechnology Monsanto community. We’ve been struggling against this for a long time. I think that it’s just really time as we see more and more of these produce coming for the opponents of GE to gather together and really try to make a unified struggle to try to find a way to regulate these products in a way that is at least respectful of the fact of everything or the health.

Right now, it’s not an honest process. We would like to try to stop it but the least we can do is try to protect your seeds and have more questions about the health. It’s good to have a really unified struggle because the power of the money in DC is just phenomenal to go up against. I’m hoping everybody can lend a hand. We’re plotting our next lawsuits now. We’re working on a strategy to be effective.

**DM:** I really thank you for your commitment to that cause. I think ultimately we’re all in the same side. We really want to preserve the future of humanity. Many people feel, I
myself being one of them, that there is a significant risk if you’ve got these massively contaminated crops that really threaten the future of our human species.

Really it requires massive commitment because as you mentioned these are really heavy leveraged assets that are controlling the current system. Ultimately, the power is in the consumer as we outnumber them enormously. As long as we have the education, we can make an informed choice. We can vote with our pocketbooks and really influence the industry.

**GS:** Biotechnology represents industrial agriculture overdependence on chemicals, abuse of the soil. It represents everything that anyone who believes a sustainable future has to struggle against. All of us that believe in the natural way of life just have to know that this kind of gene splicing has a negative effect on health that will come out in the long run.

**DM:** Thank you for all you have done in the past and your continued efforts to help preserve the quality of the food supply in the United States.

**GS:** Thank you for spreading the good word.

**DM:** Alright thanks a lot now. Bye.
I’m wondering if you could expand on that and provide some of the background and the details for our listeners.

**RC:** We first began discussing in December of last year how the USDA had approached members of the organic community and wanted them to stop filing lawsuits against genetically engineered crops and see if they could reach some kind of position on co-existence.

And then on January 21st Whole Foods sent out a email message to all of its customers and friends on Facebook basically describing this compromise that they had reached with the USDA in positive terms as being, this is the best that we can get from the USDA. The best we can get, according to this compromise, would have been allowing Monsanto to go forward and plant these genetically engineered alfalfa plants across the country.

The USDA was promising -- Secretary Vilsack was promising the organic industry representatives that if they would agree to stop opposing the approval of Monsanto’s genetically engineered alfalfa that the USDA was willing to setup a system where non-GMO crops growers could get some financial compensation when there is pollution and that there would be some geographical restrictions on where these genetically engineered alfalfa plants could be cultivated.

This came to the attention of some of our members. Our members said, you know, are you going to sit back and allow the organic industry leaders like Whole Foods and Organic Valley and Stonyfield to tell the USDA that the organic community will accept coexistence or not? So that prompted the writing of that article, *The Organic Elite Surrenders to Monsanto, What Next?* Since then this is ignited a major debate on blogs and the internet and has really gotten hundreds of thousands of people to start talking about this.

Unfortunately, last Thursday, right after my essay was published, in fact within an hour, the word came down that the USDA was going ahead improving Monsanto’s genetically engineered alfalfa with absolutely no restrictions whatsoever. In other words, what the organic elite had been promised in a series of meetings over the last month, they went back on.

Subsequently, it has come out that the White House directly intervened with the USDA and told them in no uncertain terms that we don’t want any restrictions on Monsanto’s alfalfa. We want them to build a plant anywhere they want with no consideration as to pollution of adjoining crops.

I guess this whole notion of coexistence is a mute point now. The U.S. has gone ahead despite rulings by federal courts, despite warnings by scientists over the last four years of these genetically engineered alfalfa plants should not be planted.
This is especially outrageous that they are going forward because alfalfa is a huge crop in the United States. Twenty three million acres of alfalfa are grown. That’s about 15% of all crop land in the United States right now is devoted to alfalfa.

The interesting thing about the way alfalfa has been grown up until now is that according to Michael Pollan and other experts, 93% of the alfalfa growing out there in the United States right now is not sprayed with herbicides. In other words, it’s a crop that, you know, even though they use ungodly amounts of chemical fertilizer on it which is terrible for polluting the water. It’s terrible for killing the soil and killing its ability to sequester CO2 from the atmosphere. But nonetheless, up until now, alfalfa was pretty much an herbicide free crop.

Now, what’s going to happen is that Monsanto is going to sell their alfalfa seeds all over the country which make this alfalfa roundup resistant. This means they’re going to spray the heck out of these 23 million acres of alfalfa fields.

In addition, alfalfa is the first, well, it’s actually the second perennial crop that the U.S. government has ever approved. This means the crop comes out, you know, year after year. In the case of alfalfa, it will grow for about seven years typically before a farmer re-seeds it. So it’s a crop that reproduces, is a perennial and it’s also a powerful pollinator in the sense that it puts out a lot of pollen. So basically any organic alfalfa or non-genetically engineered alfalfa within a five mile radius will immediately get polluted. These and other pollinators will carry the pollen even further.

Given the fact that alfalfa is a major food source for dairy cows across the United States, and given the fact that organic alfalfa is a major food source for organic dairy cows, we’re going to see widespread pollution getting worse every year of non-genetically engineered and organic crops by this alfalfa.

So this is totally outrageous. It totally flies in the face of campaign promises that Obama made in 2008 when he was running for president. It totally flies in the face of what Hillary Clinton who was also running for president at the time made. That they would support mandatory labeling and safety testing of GMOs.

They have gone back on their word, not only have they gone back on their word, they are allowing Monsanto to proceed ahead with absolutely no restrictions on this what we call Earth raping and climate destabilizing crop.

**DM:** That’s kind of a shocking turn of events. The use of alfalfa -- and I didn’t realize it was so widely grown but the bulk of it is being used as a source of food for cows or cattle?

**RC:** Yes, it is. It’s forage or hay for cattle.

**DM:** So that is the source of the hay. I also wasn’t aware that 93% of it did not have pesticides applied to it. It’s kind of shocking that they -- well, maybe not so much from a
business model but it certainly doesn’t seem to be justified to widely use this roundup resistant alfalfa when there doesn’t appear to be a need for it and there is emerging evidence of resistance to roundup so that they have to apply increasing concentrations and the use of other herbicides to be effective.

**RC:** Yes. I was told by Dr. Michael Hanson from the Consumers Union that there are now applications in to the government for the use of -- of course not only roundup on alfalfa which will now be legal but for more powerful herbicides like 2,4-D, the infamous component of Agent Orange and other really deadly herbicides.

So already Monsanto understands and the pesticide industry understands that when you start planting this genetically engineered alfalfa all over the country, super weeds are going to develop which will not be able to be killed by roundup and then they are going to have to spray them with even more powerful deadly herbicides 2,4-D and others. This is outrageous.

It reminds me of what Monsanto has done in the past in countries like Argentina or Brazil where there was a lot of opposition to genetically engineered crops including from a lot of organic farmers and non-GMO farmers.

Basically, what Monsanto did was they basically got seeds into the market that caused so much contamination that it gradually became a fait accompli or a fact that there is so much contamination out there that what was the use for farmers to oppose it.

I believe that Monsanto, this is an act of premeditated genetic pollution of the gene pool of alfalfa and related plants. They know exactly what they’re doing. What they understand is that if you can pollute enough alfalfa across the country to where it becomes impossible to grow organic alfalfa that isn’t contaminated perhaps then the organic community will weaken and allow genetically engineered animal feed under the rules of organic production.

This is what Monsanto tried to do back in 1998 when they pushed so hard along with the Farm Bureau and corporate agribusiness to say that GMOs should be allowed in organic. It was only because of a campaign that organic consumer associations and others lead that we were able to keep GMOs out of organic standards and we’ve been able to keep them out now for 12 years.

I think Monsanto wants to go in the backdoor now. They want these companies to accept the sort of peaceful coexistence with GMOs to soften us up. But then they want to create such a contamination level across the country in organic dairy feed that they believe the organic industry will have to capitulate.

Our answer to this of course and the answer of most organic consumers across the country is that you can’t have coexistence with a biotech bully like Monsanto. All we can do is oppose GMO crops completely and work for reforms such as the reforms that exist
in the European Union where GMO seeds and GMO food ingredients and in some cases, GMO animal feed have to be labeled.

That’s a reason why in the European Union there are no genetically engineered crops being grown except for a very small acreage of genetically engineered corn in Spain. It’s why if you look on supermarkets shelves throughout the European Union which is the largest agricultural market in the world, if you look at supermarkets shelves even in stores like ASDA which is a Wal-Mart subsidiary, you’re not going to find genetically engineered foods.

You’ll see notices in junk food purveyors like McDonalds that their foods are GMO free. Why is this? It’s not because the multinational corporations in the European Union who are typically the same ones as we have here, feel bad about GMOs. It’s because they do not want to put a label on a food saying it’s GMO. They don’t want to have to put a notice up in a restaurant that the foods are GMO.

A Monsanto executive Norman Breznick explained whyway back in 1994 in an interview with the Kansas City Star, right when a bovine growth hormone in the first genetically engineered foods were coming on the market. He said, “Putting a label on genetically engineered foods would be like putting a skull and crossbones on it.” That is the bottom line.

Our only defense at this point is for consumers to get organized and organic farmers to get organized and pressure grocery stores starting with natural food stores across the country to start voluntarily labeling foods that they know contain GMO ingredients that would be basically any processed food that contains soy or corn or cottonseed oil or canola or sugar beet sweeteners since 90% or more of these crops are genetically engineered. Or else they would have to label animal products, meat, dairy, eggs that came from these factory farms or confined animal feeding operations (CAFO).

The strategy of Organic Consumers Association and our allies is going to be to mobilize a million consumers across the country to put pressure on grocery stores especially natural food stores in their local communities to start to come clean.

DM: Before we go with the strategies because there is a few other details I would like to go into before we get there. Definitely, we would like to support you on the strategies and the recommendations. You referred to Monsanto as the biotech bully, I think that most of our listeners would go a few steps further and I believe you would too and not be reluctant to describe them as the most evil corporation on the planet.

At the same end, they are also very clever and sophisticated. They have been able to infiltrate essentially the government to the point where we are approaching a fascist state in the United States because there is this merger of the corporations and the government.
I’m wondering if you can highlight for out listeners, how Monsanto has penetrated the government and they are able to make this absurd ludicrous recommendation to approve GMO alfalfa without any restriction. I mean it’s just -- if you understand the details, it will just get you livid but the reason behind it is because they penetrated the government. If you could highlight that I would appreciate it.

RC: To start with, one of the members of the Supreme Court, the infamous Clarence Thomas who did not withdraw himself from a Supreme Court decision on genetically engineered alfalfa last year. Clarence Thomas used to be the general counsel for Monsanto.

Tom Vilsack who is currently the U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary, Vilsack was a long time supporter and confidante of Monsanto. He rode around Monsanto’s corporate jet during some of his electoral campaigns in Iowa. He was the former governor of Iowa. Tom Vilsack was named the biotech governor of the year in 2001 by the Biotechnology Industry Organization.

Others in the Obama administration include Michael Taylor. Michael Taylor was formerly the vice president of Monsanto. He is now the Food and Drug Administration Deputy Commissioner for Foods. Michael Taylor was in charge of FDA labeling practices way back in 1993 when the FDA first approved against overwhelming opposition from the public Monsanto’s recombinant bovine growth hormone.

Michael Taylor was instrumental in preventing bovine growth hormone and other genetically engineered foods from having to be labeled. He has continued, he has gone in and out working for Monsanto and the FDA every since.

Another member of the Obama Administration Roger Beachy, he is the former director of the Monsanto funded Danforth Plant Science Center in Saint Louis. He is now the director of the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

Other appointees, Islam Siddiqui, he was vice president of Monsanto in Dupont’s funded pesticide promotion group CropLife. He is now the agricultural negotiator for the U.S. Trade Representative. In other words, he is the enforcer for U.S. foreign policy that countries have to accept our genetically engineered exports.

Another appointee, Rajiv Shah, he is the former Agricultural Development Director for the pro-biotech Gates Foundation who are frequently partnering with Monsanto. He served as Obama’s USDA undersecretary for Research, Education and Economics.

Elena Kagan, has served as President Obama’s Solicitor General. She took Monsanto’s side against organic farmers on the roundup ready alfalfa case.

Ramona Ramiro corporate counsel to Dupont another biotech bully has been nominated by President Obama to serve as general counsel for the USDA.
We must point that it's not just the Obama Administration that has served as a revolving door for Monsanto. We saw the same situation under Bush Jr., Clinton and Bush Sr. We have a corporation Monsanto that is not only out of control but that places its people in high positions, that donates large sums of money to members of congress, and that basically gets its way every time there is a policy decision made in Washington.

DM: Thank you for the detailed explanation of how they have been able to penetrate the United States government. It's absolutely no surprise that a decision like this would come forth when you have that type of influence in the government.

In light of that understanding, and really one of the reasons why I contacted you for this interview, is the outrage and I think that's probably the best description of most people’s feelings when they heard of this organic elite, the capitulation to the Monsanto agenda.

In light of how they have effectively penetrated the government, even if Whole Foods and all the rest of them had held their position and resisted, do you think that would have made a difference? Or with Monsanto's influence, they would have gotten their way anyway?

RC: I think probably at this point, we have to look at the behavior of these organic company giants over the last 12 years. I remember organizing a campaign against Whole Foods and Trader Joe’s way back in 1998 when we discovered that a lot of their brand name products were already becoming contaminated with GMOs.

It took pressure, it took picket lines but we finally were able to get them to reluctantly agree not to get rid of GMOs completely from their stores but to at least make an honest effort to get it out of their brand named products. That was 12 years ago.

Has Whole Foods and the rest of the organic industry really done a good job in educating 50 million Americans who buy organic foods regularly? Were they able to educate Americans? Have they tried to point out things like -- these natural foods that you buy twice as often, the average consumers who do organic.

Did you realize that natural foods are just conventional chemical foods and that almost all of them are contaminated with GMOs? Did you realize that most of the so-called natural meat and dairy and eggs in our store are actually coming out of factory farms where the animals are regularly fed GMOs and given GMO drugs and so on? No they haven’t done that.

They have not educated the public to the fact that you shouldn't buy anything that is not certified organic unless you know the farmer directly or unless you grew it directly, unless you want to be a human guinea pig in this vast food experiment that's going or unless you want to be aiding and abetting Monsanto to destroy the Earth.

I don’t think the industry is blameless. I’ve been happy to see since our essay came out, our expose, that we’re seeing very strong statements coming out this week from

They’re now expressing -- well, disappointment is the term Whole Foods used -- they are at least expressing concern about this and they are saying that they are going to step up the fight against GMOs. I sure hope that’s true because within a few weeks, we’re probably going to see the USDA give the green light to genetically engineered sugar beets which are a widely used food ingredient across the board as a sugar sweetener.

So we’re going to test that rhetoric in practice but I think the bottom line is that natural food stores need to look at the percentage of the their sales right now that are certified organic that truly are GMO free and make a pledge to double that percentage. Whole Foods, about a third of their products are certified organic. Most of the food coops across the country, the average is around, we figure out 48-49 percent are certified organic.

We need to get the natural food producers to understand that consumers don’t want GMOs in this so-called natural foods. So you either need to reformulate your product and take out the soy lecithin or the corn sweetener or cottonseed oil or the canola oil or the sugar beet sweeteners. Or else you need to do the right thing which is if you’re selling a natural product why don’t you start making the transition to organic? And they know this.

Whole Foods knows that what consumers would like is to be able to go into their store and everything would either be organic, it would be in transition to organic or else it would be truthfully labeled as, may contain GMOs or truthfully labeled saying CAFO -- that it came from a large confined animal feeding operation.

If they would do this -- the thing about Whole Foods, they are big enough now. They are a 9 billion dollar player. They represent more than 1% of all grocery store sales in the United States. Whenever Whole Foods makes a move, the Safeways, the Targets, the Publixs, the Costcos, take notice. Even Wal-Mart nowadays is trying to claim that they are going to sell more organic and local and healthy food.

We have a good chance I believe that people will standup for their rights. If we would get the retailers where we buy our organic food to make a pledge to get the GMOs out and in the meantime to truthfully label that they are there, consumers will do the same thing they have done in Europe which is vote with their pocketbook.

Once natural food producers see that consumers will not buy their products if they are GMO contaminated, they’ll reformulate or they’ll go organic. Once these animal product companies that are selling natural products, this is a multibillion dollar industry, once they realize that consumers will not put up with the inhumane, cruel, filthy, disease ridden CAFOs, they will stop using them.
This is just not a matter of market shares for organic products. Right now organic products are 4% of the grocery store sales. Natural products are an additional 8%. The problem is that most of that 8%, the natural products are not anything of a conventional, with a green label on them.

Consumers, health minded, environmental minded, ethical minded consumers, a large number of us are trying to do the right thing. We’re trying to use our grocery store money, our food dollars to promote our health and the health of the planet. That’s why 12% of every grocery store dollar in the United States today is going for a product which is either labeled organic or natural.

The problem is that consumers when you look at the surveys, a lot of consumers don’t know the difference between natural, a label that says natural and a label that says organic. This is where the industry has fallen down. It has benefited them to not educate consumers about this because they obviously make more money selling conventional foods or so-called natural foods at a premium. But now it’s coming back on them.

People are angry when they hear that the natural food segment is thoroughly contaminated with GMOs. I think it’s time to come clean and do the right thing. I actually think natural food stores across the country will benefit from coming clean and telling the truth and adopting truth in labeling practices.

Just as our movement and our power in the marketplace has forced Safeway and Target and Super Value and Wal-Mart and the rest to at least start offering some organic foods and to at least start talking rhetorically about removing dangerous food additives and trans-fats and everything else. We can do the same thing here.

If retail stores will not do the right thing in spite of pressure from their customers to tell the truth in labeling well they leave us no choice but to try to pass laws on the local level, starting at the local level at the city and county level that will require truth in labeling on food products.

California for one state has pretty strong laws against label fraud and misleading consumers. We the Organic Consumers Association have had luck in California suing companies especially body care and cosmetic companies who are mislabeling their products as organic when they really weren’t.

Given that the Federal government appears to have been taken over lock, stock, and barrel by corporate America, and will do nothing unless they get the green light in this case from Monsanto and the rest of the biotech companies. We don’t really have any choice except to put our pressure and our leverage where our power lies, that’s at our local level in the retail level at first.

There are cities right now in the country where we can pass laws that would require grocery stores to truthfully label products that likely contain GMOs to say, may contain GMOs and where we could force grocery stores to label products that had a factory
farm which is legally defined by the EPA a CAFO. We could force them to label those products with a CAFO.

So just these four word, may contain GMOs or CAFO, I believe would alert millions and millions of consumers out there who want to do the right thing but they should complain to the manager or look for alternatives to these products and gradually we would quickly see organic go not only where it is now 4% but...

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