

General Manager's Message

What happens when ten companies control 68% of world's seed stock?

By Paul Cultrera, General Manager

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At this year's Eco-Farm Conference, attorney and author Andrew Kimbrell spoke about what he calls the lack of relationship to food that is so prevalent in what we self-identify as our "consumer culture." I was particularly struck by an example that he gave to indicate how broken that relationship is. He told of being interviewed for CBS's evening news program and how he brought up the fact that large agribusiness firms such as Monsanto have been attempting to monopolize the world's supply of seeds. When he began to explain the danger he saw in this, the journalist who was conducting the interview agreed that this was very important news, but asked if he could use a different word than "seeds" to describe the problem. When he asked why, the reply was that "people don't know about seeds, they don't realize that food comes from seeds." Assuming that the journalist knows her audience, things are much more out of whack than I ever imagined.

But then again, why should I be surprised? When many Americans' most common experience of food is what they see advertised on television or what they are served in fast food or chain restaurants, then why would they make any connection between what they are buying and a seed. Or an animal. A week after Kimbrell spoke, the media was full of the news that a representative of the Humane Society had released video footage that he had taken covertly at the Hallmark Meat Packing Company in Chino, CA. The footage showed cows being pushed around on forklifts and having water sprayed up their nostrils, all in violation of state and federal laws. The public was not only outraged at what they saw, but also acted with great surprise that conditions like that would be permitted in a slaughterhouse. Perhaps the conditions at Hallmark may have been more extreme than those found at most commercial slaughterhouses. But the public surprise would imply that most people aren't aware of the sheer volume of cattle that are typically run through a commercial slaughterhouse—up to 400 per hour—and how that is likely to create similar conditions in most cases. In his book, *The Meat You Eat*, author Ken Midkiff quotes a slaughterhouse worker who told him "All those living animals, stunned, stuck and skinned... They just keep coming at you... you get to where they're just things. Some of the guys take it out on the animals." The Hallmark story was all over the news for a few weeks, as it resulted in a massive recall of beef, but then the story went away and there has been little mainstream media attention given to the way that meat is raised and processed every day in America.

In such a climate, where Old McDonald has been replaced by Ronald, it has become easy for the world's ten largest seed companies to silently take control of 68% of the world's seed stock, and it will become just as easy for them to grab the rest. Giants like Monsanto are intent on patenting seeds and introducing "terminator technology," which leaves seeds sterile, making it impossible for growers to save their own seed and forcing them to come back to the seed companies with open wallets each year before they can plant. In that game, biodiversity loses out to corporate greed. If these companies have their way, it may be that the only place that you will be able to see the seeds that are on the cover of this month's Reporter will be in similar photos.

The Co-op has always run counter to the general food amnesia that has gripped our society. It was founded by and has been supported by people who don't want to forget food and where it comes from. So we bring our farmers into the store and we invite authors like Ken Midkiff to speak in our Community Learning Center. And we purchase beef from Prather Ranch because they are a small, certified humane operation that raises, slaughters and processes their animals on site and in very small numbers. If the day comes when Monsanto agents arrive in Sacramento to confiscate the seeds that we have all saved from our gardens and farms, I imagine a mass of Co-op shoppers and farmers barricading themselves in the store and resisting, using shopping carts as their shields. At least I hope so. Because I like to think that all of us here—customers, employees and suppliers—are in our own ways working to keep our relationship to food and where it comes from alive. Because I also like to think that in a very real sense we all work for food, to enjoy it now, and to create a future in which people won't forget that food comes from seeds.

Correction: In our Annual Report, I wrote: "When we closed the Elk Grove store, there were 60 people working either at that store or in administrative positions that supported it. After closing the store, half of those employees stayed with us and half were laid off. In the following months we were able to hire back all of the

people who were laid off and who wished to come back to work.”

A more accurate statement would be: “When we closed the Elk Grove store, there were 60 people working either at that store or in administrative positions that supported it. After closing the store, 30 of our employees were laid off. (i.e. not everyone who was laid off had been working at the Elk Grove store. Following the guidance of our employees’ union contract, employees were laid off in reverse order of tenure.) In the following months we were able to hire back all of the people who were laid off and who wished to come back to work.”