

[Monsanto and HR 875, Take Two](#)

By nonny mouse Thursday Mar 26, 2009 5:00pm

The other day, I wrote a post on the Food Safety Modernization Act of 2009: HR 875 being introduced to Congress by Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D –CT), in which I made the erroneous statement that her husband, Stanley Greenberg, worked for Monsanto. I also included in this post extracts from emails sent to me by Jill Richardson, an intelligent and passionate campaigner for organic farming. To her credit, when she read my post, she immediately sent me an urgent email, warning me that there was a great deal of misinformation buzzing around the Internet, which I had unwittingly included in my post. She herself pointed out that (1) the bill has nothing to do with Monsanto, (2) Rep. DeLauro's husband is a pollster for a company that once had Monsanto as a customer a decade ago, but he in no way 'works' for Monsanto, (3) HR 875 as it currently stands is very unlikely to even pass, and (4) the group behind disseminating this trumped-up propaganda is [NICFA](#), whose mission statement maintains their goal is to 'promote and preserve unregulated direct farmer-to-consumer trade' and 'oppose any government funded or managed National Animal Identification System. This organization has been aided by the support of a woman named Linn Cohen-Cole, whose unsubstantiated and exaggerated claims in an obsessive crusade against Monsanto, Hillary Clinton, Obama and anyone else in an imagined government 'plot' to nationalize farming does seem to indicate a serious lack of credibility.

I have since been in contact with Rep. DeLauro's office, and they have confirmed that Rep. DeLauro has been meeting with organic farmers to draw up a proposed list of amendments to HR 875 based on those discussions. While these amendments are not yet public knowledge, and would be an informal document to clarify the bill, she and her staff would be happy to get the word out that the Congresswoman is indeed working very hard on improving both the bill and her office's relationship with organic and small farmers. And to Rep. DeLauro, I add my personal apologies for any inadvertent misinformation regarding herself or her husband presented in my post.

To set the record straight:

There is no language in HR 875 that would regulate, penalize, or shut down backyard gardens or 'criminalize' gardeners; the bill focuses on ensuring the safety of food in interstate commerce.

Farmer's markets would not be regulated, fined, or shut down, and would, in fact, benefit from strict safety standards applied to imported food to ensure that unsafe imported food doesn't compete with locally grown produce.

The bill would not prohibit or interfere with organic farming, or mandate the use of any chemicals or types of seeds. The National Organic Program (NOP) is under the jurisdiction of the USDA. HR 875 addresses food safety issues and falls under the jurisdiction of the FDA.

Monsanto and any other large agribusiness company had no part whatsoever in drafting this bill, and Rep. DeLauro's husband and his company do no lobbying on this issue.

HR 875 has nothing to do with any national animal ID system, which would fall under the jurisdiction of the USDA, and not the FDA.

This isn't a done deal – the bill hasn't yet even been considered by any Congressional committee, nevermind seen any debate or proposed amendments. There is no 'plot' to ram this through Congress and into law.

Monsanto, as bizarre as this may sound, is an innocent party in this fiasco. On a positive note, this entire misapprehension may actually result in a more clearly defined proposed bill on food safety, highlight concerns of organic and small farmers in a more constructive environment, make genuine improvements in food safety for consumers and engender a more honest and open debate on GM food, safety, and global agriculture. It also shows that the internet, while an arena for a great deal of misinformation and outright fabrication, has an amazing self-correcting machinery for when things do go wrong. So while I'm truly regretful for any promulgation of misinformation I've aided in fostering, I'm more than happy with the unplanned consequences.

Further to this, I've also been having a lively email discussion with a representative of Monsanto, Mr. Bradley Mitchell, who read my original post, as well as the responses of our C&L readership with a great deal of interest. Mr. Mitchell describes himself as a 'social liberal, fiscal conservative', who gardens, cans food, and buys locally grown produce, firmly believing 'in supporting the local economy, preserving open spaces, and most of the other things buying local produce supports.'

'I can't argue against poor regulation of corporations', he wrote to me, however, 'I would contend that regulator oversight varies with the industry. I'm pretty comfortable with safety testing for GM crops (or I wouldn't work for Monsanto) but our agricultural policy is a mess worldwide. It's unconscionable that a third of the world is starving and so many at the opposite end of the economic spectrum are overweight to the point of illness. GM is not a silver bullet for this, but I think it is a powerful tool in addressing these problems (which is why I work here).'

Not exactly how I imagined Satan's minion, frankly. I asked Mr. Mitchell if he would be interested in presenting Monsanto's position in this exclusive post for C&L, and he has kindly, and enthusiastically, accepted. While I understand that much of our readership has strong emotions regarding Monsanto, I would urge our readers to respond in any comments to Mr Mitchell in a courteous and respectful manner. So, without further ado, here it is:

Just when I was losing faith in the internet as a tool for dialogue and change, along comes Nonny Mouse and C&L with an invite to Monsanto to respond to all this silliness on HR 875. It's a strange new world, but a welcome one.

As Nonny Mouse has pointed out, Monsanto has nothing to do with HR 875. We aren't behind it and don't even have a position on it. You can read about this in detail in our [blog](#). In fact, contrary to rampant, poorly-informed opinion; Monsanto doesn't consider local agriculture, or even organic agriculture, as a threat to our business. Readers will likely be surprised to learn that many of our customers work small farms. Some are even growing organically (not all our seeds are GM).

HR 875, for those who are understandably lost in the debate, is intended to improve US food safety laws. Given relatively recent incidents involving peanut butter, ground beef and spinach, there are a lot of Americans who think it's high time. The true tragedy of all this rumor-mongering about HR 875 and its supposed attack on local and organic agriculture is that it has distracted people from the discussion that should be occurring – how can we improve food safety without putting undue burden on small farms and businesses that want to sell and process food locally?

In many ways, this whole HR 875 incident is a pretty good microcosm for the larger debate about the role of biotechnology in agriculture. True dialogue and discussion suffers because of rumor, misinformation and petty bickering. Constructive discourse around agricultural biotechnology pales when compared to the amount of argument. Something like a third of the population is without sufficient food at any given point in time. You would think this would be impetus enough to put aside differences of opinion and chart a course forward, but apparently it's not.

Take for example my recent attempts to engage the readers at OpEdNews, the site where the rumors about Monsanto and HR 875 began. With complete transparency about my role as Director of Public Affairs at Monsanto, I began posting articles on the site, and commenting on the largely negative postings on Monsanto and biotechnology. I was hoping for some constructive discourse. The responses I got were, well... less than constructive. Let's just say that I learned that if you get into a debate with Monsanto – just mention Agent Orange. Apparently it trumps any logic, data or reason brought to the table.

In fact, folks at OEN were made so insecure by my posting there that they are [running a poll to determine whether I should be allowed to continue to post](#). As I am writing this, the vote is 56% against my being allowed to post, 36% for, and 8% undecided out of 291 voters.

During the last three weeks of dealing with OEN and their readers, I've been frequently reminded of the e.e. cummings poem:

The Cambridge ladies live in furnished souls
Are unbeautiful and have comfortable minds

Well ladies, the stakes are too high. It's time to refurnish those souls, as well as hearts and minds. Are you up to it? I hope so, because the UN says that by 2050, we are going to need to double food production in order to feed the world, and we going to have to do it in the face of climate change and increasingly scarce resources such as water. Whether you are for biotech or against it, a lot depends on our ability to work together. Rumors and mudslinging won't help. A lot depends on this – like our kids' futures.

Monsanto is committed to this dialogue. For my part, and that of a lot of my colleagues, for a start we're committing to participating in where we haven't been active in the past, and where the opinions have run counter to our own. That is, if you'll have us.

If you want to learn more about Monsanto and our perspective on some of the more common issues surrounding our company, visit [www. Monsanto.com/fortherecord](http://www.Monsanto.com/fortherecord) (Consider it one of many furniture shops).

For the Twitterati, if you want updates on my efforts to foster dialogue you can follow me on Twitter at MonMitch.