

The World Food Prize: Recognizing Heroes or Promoting Agribusiness Interests?

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The World Food Prize — a non-profit organization based in Des Moines, Iowa — touts a lofty mission to reward those who have contributed to “combating hunger by increasing the quality, quantity and availability of food around the world.”¹ Behind this rhetoric, however, are millions of dollars in financial support from agribusiness and prize recipients whose contributions to agriculture have done little or nothing to reduce hunger.

This point was perhaps never more salient than when the 2013 award was given to Monsanto’s Vice-President Robert Fraley for his work in agricultural biotechnology — including the development of genetically engineered (GE) Roundup Ready crops used widely in U.S. corn, soy and cotton production.² Trumpeting the “widespread accessibility of [GE seeds to] farmers across the globe,” the World Food Prize fails to acknowledge that most developing countries do not grow GE food crops, and many, including most African nations, remain fiercely resistant to GE crops.³

The World Food Prize was created by Norman Borlaug — Iowa native, father of the Green Revolution and long-time supporter of the mechanization of agriculture — so it is no surprise that his \$250,000 prize is given to promoters of industrial agriculture that focus on increasing yields, including through the use of GE crops.⁴ It’s also no surprise that corporate agribusiness donates millions of dollars to the “Nobel Prize for Food and Agriculture” and may even be involved in choosing prize recipients, since members of the World Food Prize’s selection committee remain anonymous.⁵

Industry Involvement

The World Food Prize Foundation relies on a sponsor base comprising pro-GE foundations, corporate agribusinesses and farm groups like the Iowa Corn Promotion Board, the United Soybean Board, the Iowa Pork Foundation and the Iowa Farm Bureau. One analysis of sponsors found that between 2009 and 2011, 28 percent of the World Food Prize’s major

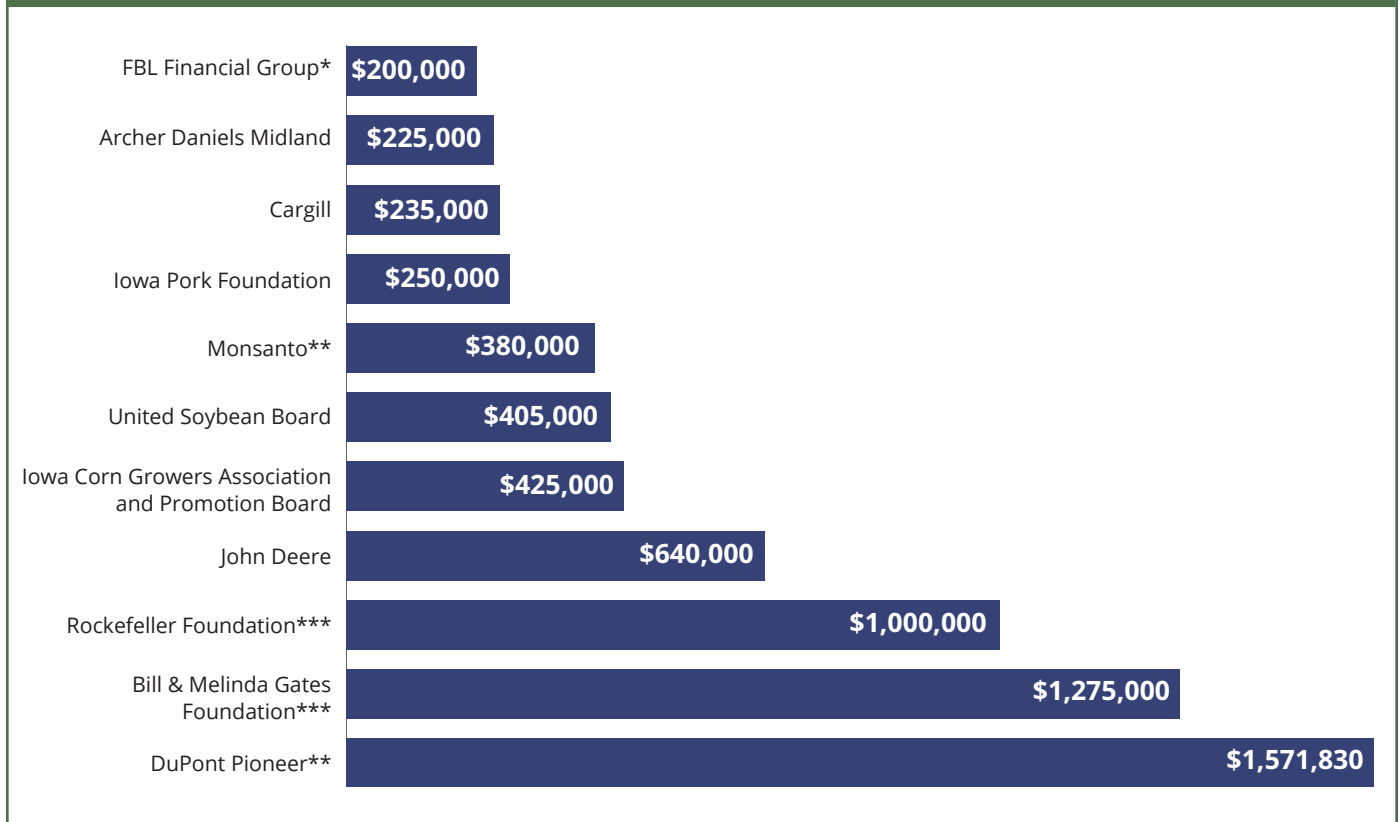


contributions, amounting to millions of dollars, came from agribusinesses and affiliates.⁶ A more in-depth analysis of donors from 1999 to 2011 shows millions more coming from these donors.

Monsanto

Monsanto contributed \$380,000 to World Food Prize annual programs between 1999 and 2011.⁷ The company also pledged an additional \$5 million in 2008 for converting a historic Des

Examples of Major Sponsors (1999–2011)



* More than 70 percent of the FBL Financial Group is currently owned by the Iowa Farm Bureau.¹⁴

** DuPont Pioneer and Monsanto pledged an additional \$1 million and \$5 million, respectively, for World Food Prize building renovations.¹⁵

*** The Rockefeller and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundations — advocates for GE food crops — contributed more than \$2.2 million.¹⁶

Moines Public Library into the Norman E. Borlaug Hall of Laureates — a museum and venue for the World Food Prize’s annual symposium, the Borlaug Dialogue.⁸ In 2013, this highly publicized event in Iowa will give Monsanto an opportunity to promote its products before an audience of global agricultural stakeholders.⁹

DuPont Pioneer

DuPont subsidiary Pioneer Hi-Bred International contributed more than \$1.5 million between 1999 and 2011 to World Food Prize annual programs and pledged \$1 million for building renovations in 2008.¹⁰ Additional donations of \$195,000 came from the Iowa-based company’s President Paul Schickler, past CFO and Senior Vice-President Jerry Chicoine and past Directors Fred Weitz and Owen Newlin.¹¹

John Deere

John Deere contributed \$640,000 to the World Food Prize between 1999 and 2011.¹² As a manufacturer of the equipment used in industrial agriculture, John Deere has a vested interest in promoting high-tech, expensive machinery designed for vast monocultures of corn in Iowa, not small and diverse farms in the developing world.¹³

Government Sponsors

One of the largest sponsors of the World Food Prize is the American taxpayer. Donations from federal and state government agencies accounted for more than \$10.6 million between 1999 and 2011.¹⁷

More than \$8 million came from the state government, including contributions from the State Historical Society, Iowa State University and the Iowa Department of Public Health.¹⁸ The Iowa Economic Development Authority gave more than \$1.9 million.¹⁹

Iowa Senators Tom Harkin and Chuck Grassley funneled \$750,000 of taxpayers’ money into the World Food Prize in 2010 through the federal appropriations process.²⁰ Other federal money includes \$238,000 from the U.S. National Park Service and more than \$460,000 from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.²¹ The Institute of Museum and Library Services, a federal entity charged with ensuring public access to libraries and museums, gave more than \$1.9 million.²²

Government support is also apparent at World Food Prize award ceremonies, which have been hosted by the U.S. State Department for the last decade and which emphasize the role

of public-private partnerships in addressing global hunger.²³ The State Department works actively on behalf of American agribusiness interests like Monsanto to promote biotechnology in emerging global economies, and the World Food Prize is feeding into these efforts by awarding the same corporations.²⁴

Missing the Mark

It appears that the World Food Prize sees agricultural development and hunger alleviation in Green Revolution terms — focusing on food production instead of access to food — and awards the prize accordingly. The 1998 prize recipient was recognized for developing the private seed industry in India and founding the hybrid seed company Mahyco.²⁵ Monsanto acquired 26 percent of Mahyco the same year, and the companies formed the joint venture Mahyco Monsanto Biotech in India, which has been criticized for alleged monopolistic practices.²⁶

The 2006 World Food Prize recipients were recognized for converting a large area of unproductive land in Brazil into industrial soy and cattle operations, mostly for export to developed countries, which raised criticism that the World Food Prize was rewarding large landowners in Brazil.²⁷

Many prizes have been given for achievements that ignore the underlying problem of food access. Such a narrow focus on production — often rewarding privatization — overlooks the reality of hunger. The world's farmers produce enough to feed everyone; however, poverty and lack of access mean that many of the world's poor still go hungry.²⁸

Even if increasing production was the solution, the 2013 award for GE crops misses the mark. GE seeds do not increase yields, despite ardent public relations campaigns from industry groups and biotechnology supporters.²⁹ The seeds are grown with expensive fertilizers, pesticides and mechanization, which keep these technologies out of reach or result in debts that cripple small farmers.³⁰ John Deere's tractors and Monsanto's costly GE seeds and chemicals will not lift up the world's hungry.

There appears to be international consensus on this point. The International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development, an international project of the United Nations and the World Bank, consulted hundreds of experts around the world and, in 2009, concluded that the high costs of GE seeds and chemicals, uncertain yields and the potential to undermine local food security make GE a poor choice for the developing world.³¹

Conclusions and Recommendations

Hunger is a real problem that needs real solutions. A distinguished award that carries a \$250,000 bonus is one way to incentivize such innovations.³² Indeed, some past recipients seem in line with the World Food Prize's stated mission to meaningfully address hunger issues — providing microloans to subsistence farmers, encouraging cooperative production

and establishing storage and transportation facilities.³³ But other times the prize appears to operate as a *quid pro quo* for industry sponsors whose agricultural innovations are designed to make money, not feed people or help small farmers around the world.

Before being considered a legitimate award for alleviating hunger, Food & Water Watch recommends that:

- The World Food Prize should not focus the award on increases in agricultural yields, because this does not correlate with reduced global hunger.
- The World Food Prize should not award laureates that are affiliated with corporate sponsors.
- The World Food Prize should increase transparency by revealing the secret selection committee to ensure no industry ties.
- The federal and state government should not give public money to the World Food Prize while it continues to reward private corporations.

Endnotes

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