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Presenting Key Issues in a Rational Manner

to the Non-Ag Community

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A quick scan of the program for your workshop might lead one to believe my subject is out of place here. In terms of agricultural credentials, I could certainly be considered out of place: I consider myself a journalist gone straight; I was educated as a journalist and was a reporter for The Kansas City Star before entering public relations work and then joining Monsanto nearly 20 years ago.

But I don't believe either the subject or the speaker is out of place for this gathering. And I think perhaps most of you will agree after you hear me out.

The agricultural industry today is crowded with volatile issues that are prominent in public debate -- from the overriding debate on farm economy ... to the value of technology ... to environmental issues.

It seems the debate on those three issues will be with us from now on.

Decisions on many of these issues are no longer being made by those in agriculture, or those who are experts in the issue areas. They are being made to an increasing degree by political constituencies who may draw all or much of their understanding of certain issues from news media accounts. That's why we in Monsanto find it is imperative that we participate in public and media debate, and that our opinion is heard.

There has certainly been no shortage of technology and environmental safety issues in recent years for Monsanto to present -- as your program says -- "in a rational manner to the non-ag community."

To mention a few:

- o Two years ago, the EPA announced it would initiate a Special Review of our Lasso herbicide because of safety questions.

- o Twenty days later, in December of '84, Monsanto announced we would ask permission to field test a pesticide produced by a genetically engineered microbe.

- o In mid-'85, a world coalition called Pesticide Action Network said parathion, which was then manufactured by Monsanto, may be responsible for half the world's pesticide poisonings.

o This year, bovine somatotropin (or bovine growth hormone) came under fire of biotechnology critic Jeremy Rifkin and a small coalition of dairymen...which helped lead to Congressional hearings.

o And the Drug Enforcement Agency chose glyphosate for marijuana control, gaining Monsanto new critics -- including a successful monthly magazine dedicated to drugs and paraphernalia, named High Times -- circulation 1/4th million.

That's a few of the issues we've faced in the past 2 years. Our participation in these issues isn't based on our management's love of a good argument. Our business is based on the benefits of technology, and it's dependent on society's balancing of those benefits against possible risks. For all of us here, I'm sure there is the desire for a strong American agriculture. I think many of you may have a bigger role to play in the public policy debate of agricultural issues.

What I will do in the next several minutes is tell you about some of our communications experiences, which you may be able to apply to your own situations:

o First, I'll review some research we did on questions about biotechnology -- some of which are relevant to any technology -- plus some journalists' beliefs.

o Second, I'll describe our experiences with our proposed field test of a genetically engineered microbe.

o Third I'll briefly describe our communications concerning the Special Review of Lasso.

o Finally, I'll draw a few conclusions for your consideration.

You may have heard of the college professor who said to his class, "All of us here have a job to do. Mine is to talk, and yours is to listen. I hope you don't finish your job before I finish mine." I'll try to help us finish together by keeping it short.

The research I mentioned is in three segments -- the * first a poll conducted by Northern Illinois University for Monsanto in late '84 and early '85. They interviewed Science Policy Leaders, Congressional Staffers, Environmental Leaders and Religious Leaders -- the term "Leader" in this case meaning they are active in public policy debate in addition to other credentials.

* When asked what benefits of genetic engineering came to mind, almost all thought of medical improvements; a majority also thought of agricultural improvements.

* Asked if they thought risks or benefits of the technology were greater -- more than half said benefits were much or slightly greater, a small minority thought risks were greater.

* Asked about government regulation of biotechnology, a sizeable majority felt it was about right.

* And big majorities felt field tests of engineered microbes should be allowed -- even 2/3rds of the

environmentalists. (However, in separate focus group interviews of rural residents, the residents had no real objections to other field tests but were concerned about microbes.)

* Asked where they got their information about biotechnology, science magazines got highest scores, with newspapers second highest.

* They were asked what media they had the most confidence in. Science magazine and Scientific American were distant leaders. The New York Times and the Wall Street Journal got fairly high mentions, though local newspapers came in low.

* In electronic media, network TV came in at the bottom, even lower than local newspapers -- but NOVA and public radio were considered fairly credible.

* Asked about their confidence in information from certain institutions, the National Institutes of Health rated very credible; Congressional Committees got fair marks; the Sierra Club got low marks, and a chemical company came in dead last.

** We also did a survey of community residents plus some opinion leaders in 4 cities in May 1985. Something over half of those interviewed said they knew some, or at least a little, about biotechnology. We asked that half of the sample questions including these two:

* Would you favor a biotechnology facility in your community? Two thirds to 4/5ths said "yes."

* Would you favor field testing an agricultural product produced through biotechnology? Two thirds said "yes."

** That's two examples from a broad survey. Those who said they knew something about biotechnology tended to be favorable to a facility or to field testing -- one argument for open communications.

Before we leave research, let me mention a few important statistics about journalists' beliefs. These are based on a biennial survey of about 300 journalists -- half newspaper, the rest wire service, magazine, TV and radio. It's done by Opinion Research Corporation.

* The journalists were given a list of 28 industries and asked who they believed had "outstanding communication practices." The chemical industry was near the bottom of the list, our traditional position. That's one reason we urge academics and independent scientists to join us in speaking on scientific issues -- our voice, more often than not, is suspect with the journalist. * The journalists were asked what information they thought should be required to be released. Three-fourths of them believed companies should not be required to release information on new R&D or patent developments ...

* ...and virtually all of them agreed companies should not be required to release competitive marketing information of a confidential nature. The point being, you can have a thorough discussion with a journalist and he or she will be

understanding if you have a reason for not answering some questions.

* Most journalists believe the head of the organization should be the main spokesman on all key issues, with the remainder believing he should at least be involved in very pressing circumstances.

* At the same time, thank goodness, most journalists have at least a moderate amount of respect for the public relations executive.

** I've saved the best for last. In spite of their desire to hear from the top, in credibility by professional or occupational group, CEOs come in third. Small business proprietors come in second.

* The consistent big winner in credibility among journalists are scientists. When Monsanto faces tough issues, the P.R. staff often handles the bulk of the discussion. But if it's an important scientific issue, you'll likely see a Monsanto scientist in our press conference or public meeting or key interview. And that again is why we encourage academics and independent scientists to join us in speaking out on scientific issues, especially when opinions based on emotion, rather than scientific fact, are carrying the day in the press.

** So that's the type of research we look to as we plan our communications. Next I'll talk a little about our experiences with a proposed biotechnology field test.

In 1984, Monsanto had reached a point that we were ready to take a research project out of the laboratory and into a small-scale field test. You're probably all familiar with the naturally-occurring microbe, Bacillus Thuringiensis, which produces a protein toxic to certain insects. Abbott Labs has marketed this natural insecticide for years under the trademark Dipel, and other companies sell it as well. Our researchers had moved a gene from B.t. to the soil bacterium, Pseudomonas fluorescens; the engineered organism was coated on corn seed, and then colonized along the plant root as it grew. It was a prototype system.

We decided on a communications strategy that had us take the initiative on news and discussion, at every step of the process, to pose issues from our perspective. We would emphasize the utility and benefits of the science; we would subtly review the safety precautions and testing; and we would emphasize cooperation between Monsanto and EPA. The alternatives were to say little or nothing and wait for the criticism of others; or concentrate only on key government contacts -- but that would leave too many audiences to the same critics.

In November 1984 we announced in the media that we were "preparing to formally notify EPA of our intention to field test soil bacteria that had been changed through biotechnology to produce a naturally occurring insecticide."

By this time we had identified the main points we wanted our listeners to carry away; we had anticipated the

toughest questions and planned how to answer them. We had drafted one of our key scientists as spokesman, and we had rehearsed him on techniques for interviewing by the media.

For our initial announcement, our scientist travelled to a Washington press conference.

* The press coverage exceeded our expectations. The Associated Press story was almost wholly positive, quoting our scientist saying, "It's conceivable that if we're successful with this technique, chemical insecticides as we know them could be phased out over the next 25 years." The St. Louis Post-Dispatch, one of the toughest newspapers in the country, used the headline "New Bacteria Could Reshape Pest Control, Monsanto Says" -- and included criticism only on the second page beginning at paragraph 16.

* A month later our scientist headed a follow-up briefing for the New York media, which resulted in still more positive coverage. The New York Times science writer mentioned that we had filed 800 pages of supporting data and only in the 10th paragraph cited criticism -- followed by our response.

Throughout 1985 we continued to do briefings -- from the St. Charles Farm Booster Banquet to research tours with state legislators.

* We continued to get positive attention in 1985 -- from the St. Charles Post to network TV, NOVA, Fortune, London Economist magazine, radio free Europe, Australian national TV, and on and on.

** In April 1985 EPA said an Experimental Use Permit would be required, which meant more stories. In November we announced that we had filed for the EUP. More coverage.

In February of this year, after 15 months of favorable publicity, we scheduled detailed local and state briefings of officials.

Then, as sometimes happens, things began to unravel, with four events:

o The West Coast firm, Advanced Genetic Sciences, disclosed unauthorized rooftop work -- which triggered Congressional subcommittee hearings.

* o March 9 Post-Dispatch stories reported that some independent scientists criticized our environmental data.

o Nine days later St. Charles, the city near our cite, passed a resolution opposing the project due to the closeness of our research farm to their city.

* o And the last straw, the EPA, in a cover letter to its own Scientific Advisory Panel, used the word "flawed" to describe our studies.

** As you can imagine, we did a lot of media interviewing, correspondence and briefing ... just to explain the upcoming role of the EPA's own Scientific Advisory Panel!

At about that point, our cause was joined by Dr. Peter Raven, director of the Missouri Botanical Garden and chairman of the National Science Foundation's Advisory Committee on Biology. He testified in our behalf before the EPA panel -- and probably helped us win their endorsement.

* The EPA's panel of experts recommended the EUP be granted. And with the experts speaking in our favor, the press coverage turned positive overnight. We still felt some resistance near the farm site, but it was turning fast in our favor.

But less than a month later, EPA said it would defer a decision until some further environmental testing was completed. So we had missed the corn-growing season.

* The press covered the story fairly -- except for the headline writer at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

We've submitted protocols to EPA for the additional testing, but we've not yet decided if we'll seek the Permit to go the field in '87, or move into other biotech areas.

** The other experience I want to describe on presenting key issues is our Special Review of Lasso herbicide. This was a historic case -- at least for Monsanto. The EPA would conduct a Special Review on the largest selling herbicide in the United States.

In November '84 -- the same month we announced our intention to field test the microbial pesticide -- EPA announced its intention to conduct a Special Review on Lasso. I attended their initial press conference in Washington that month, and it was clear to me that we needed to respond quickly. We had made the necessary preparations and called our own press conference for two hours later. It was in keeping with our belief in presenting our point of view.

In the following six weeks, Monsanto handled more than 150 media interviews on Lasso. Again, we had defined the key points we wanted to make; we had anticipated the likely questions and prepared to answer them; and we had summarized information from great detail into manageable bites.

I should point out that we do not respond to be responding. We do in fact weigh the need for a response. In January 1985, when EPA announced the beginning of the Special Review, we had a vigorous response at the ready. But EPA's briefing was comparatively low key, and they discussed other pesticide reviews, so we shelved our response and just answered media calls.

The most difficult task is simplifying complex data into something that can be understood and used by the media. It's an important step. Monsanto filed its original response to PD 2/3 in May of 1985; it was a stack of data two feet high. In the months since then, we've added a lot to it. This audience won't be surprised when I say the "Executive Summary" was 122 pages long. But a newspaper reporter would be surprised; and he wouldn't read it. We summarized the summary into 7 pages -- and for the electronic media we further distilled that into key points of less than one page. It's too much work -- but the alternative is not getting a hearing for your arguments.

Early in the process of Special Review, we turned to the group that had credibility with our customers: our hundreds of field sales and product development staffers.

These people are experts in their fields -- but they had never had the occasion to become expert in registration issues. We did field trips briefing them on the facts about Lasso toxicology, about the registration process, and about preparing themselves for interviews -- or just tough questions from the public. They were fast learners, and they proved that complex technical issues -- when absolutely necessary -- can be reduced to simple issues. It isn't easy; for scientists I know it can be distressing; but sometimes it is imperative.

Throughout 1985 and into this year, we took our story to the news media -- giving our position; correcting errors; commenting on difficult, imprecise questions like "suspected" harm from water contamination; and encouraging comment to EPA from our customers, associations, academics and others.

This month (October '86), EPA's recommended regulatory position is expected (PD 2/3). After that we'll have an opportunity to comment, as will others. Then the EPA's Scientific Advisory Panel will review and recommend. And sometime in 1987 we'll reach a final regulatory decision.

The two experiences I've talked about didn't have too much in common from a communications approach. The first was proactive -- we decided on the communications approach and, for more than a year, stuck with it -- leading the discussion. The second was more reactive; though we continually made our positions heard, we were reacting to a generally negative situation.

Of course, several things were common to both, too. And that's where I would like to draw my conclusions.

First of all, I believe voices in support of science and technology are needed badly. Whether from industry or extension, if you see agricultural issues that are reported incorrectly, I encourage you to join in the fray. I won't tell you it's easy. But those of you who do it know that it gets easier every time you do it -- and for many it gets to be rewarding. We have to be aggressive; our critics are.

Secondly -- and in support of the first point -- we're convinced that honesty, openness and cooperation will succeed more often than not. No one bats 1000. In public relations work we sometimes measure victories according to the shade of one's black eye. Still that's better than a knockout punch. Some people believe their personal integrity is compromised when they are quoted on page 1; I believe it's an opportunity to fight for what's right in a place that counts.

Third -- we can get control of controversial issues before they become crises. (Usually.) The court of public opinion today is as important as the court of law. It's important that we present our case early and well to the jury, who in this case is the news media and in turn the public. We must help people see behind the headlines.

Fourth -- anyone can deal with the media and survive. What it requires is preparation. We like to tell our management -- no manager wants to walk into a conference room and give a presentation to his peers or his bosses without preparing; yet many will walk into an interview -- which will turn into a newspaper story for all to see -- without thinking to prepare. It requires thinking through the points you want to make; anticipating tough questions and your response; keeping your thoughts in short, layman language; telling the truth -- but keeping control of the interview and asserting your rights.

Finally, don't forget my chart about credibility. The technically educated expert, whether he or she is in industry or not, has credibility with the reporter. I'm sure you all have enough to do without spending more time as spokesmen.

But as far as I'm concerned, the simple involvement of people like you is the first real step to presenting issues in a rational manner to the non-ag community.

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