

Opening Statement of

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Domestic Policy Subcommittee
Oversight and Government Reform Committee

Hearing on

“Are ‘Superweeds’ an Outgrowth of USDA Biotech Policy? (Part I)”

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In farm fields across the Southeast and Midwest, a new crop has been sprouting among the rows of genetically engineered, Roundup Ready soy, corn, and cotton. Familiar weeds have rapidly evolved a significant new trait: they can no longer be controlled by the herbicide Roundup. Herbicide-resistant weeds such as pigweed, horseweed, waterhemp, giant ragweed, palmer amaranth, and common lambsquarters have infested millions of acres of prime farmland. Some can grow three inches per day, reach a height of seven feet, and have stalks as thick as baseball bats. They can destroy farm equipment.

When the U.S. Department of Agriculture allowed the commercialization of Roundup Ready crops, the results were supposed to be bigger yields, better profits for farmers, and less pollution from herbicides. Though it has been little more than 10 years, for many farmers these promised benefits seem like a distant memory. The natural selection of herbicide-resistant weeds in farm fields growing Roundup Ready crops is an indirect negative consequence of a technology that was purported to be nearly miraculous. And it is totally cancelling out the alleged benefits of genetically engineered, herbicide-resistant crops.

Rather than fewer herbicides, farmers have been using more herbicides, and more toxic ones. In fact, Monsanto Company, the manufacturer of Roundup, spent years erroneously advising farmers to exclusively use ever-greater quantities of Roundup to control the weeds in their fields. And for years, farmers listened. Meanwhile, these weeds were receiving evolutionary pressure to select for a trait of resistance to Roundup. The Roundup resistance trait is now dominant in weeds growing in many areas of the country.

The introduction of genetically engineered plants is regulated by the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service of the USDA, pursuant to its authority under the Plant Protection Act. Where was the USDA while a weed problem that imperils modern agricultural practices was developing? In courtrooms across this country, USDA has been rebuked for having unreasonably and arbitrarily dismissed the environmental consequences of deregulating genetically engineered crops. In some cases, federal judges have found that USDA could produce no written record that it had ever even considered

the impact on farmers. Thus a federal district court invalidated USDA's decision to deregulate Roundup Ready Alfalfa. USDA is now awaiting further directions from a federal judge before taking further steps to consider whether, and on what terms, to deregulate this crop.

Since taking office, Secretary Vilsack has promised that the new Administration would take a fresh look at biotech crop policy. But the biotech industry isn't waiting for a new policy. Chemical industry giants such as Dow, BASF, and Syngenta are plowing forward with new varieties of soy, corn, and cotton. They are already asking USDA to deregulate seed varieties that have been genetically engineered to tolerate their own herbicides. In fact, the evolution of Roundup-resistant weeds, while a problem for Monsanto, has been an opportunity for the other large chemical companies.

The immediate consequence of the deregulation and planting of these multiple-herbicide tolerant crops will be the increase in use of more toxic herbicides. Dicamba and 2,4-D are more toxic than Roundup, and their increased use can only be regarded as a setback for sustainable agriculture. In the longer term, the herbicide resistance of the weeds themselves could further change. If Roundup-resistant weeds evolved in only 10 years, could multiple herbicide-resistant weeds be far away? Indeed, several species of weeds already exhibit multiple-herbicide resistance. The development of more multi-herbicide-resistant weeds poses a very serious threat to agriculture in the United States as we know it. The increased expense for mechanical and hand labor to remove herbicide-resistant crops on today's colossal farms could be cost-prohibitive, potentially wreaking havoc on modern farming.

Until now, USDA has deregulated, without condition, every herbicide-resistant seed variety that industry has produced. Will that pattern continue into the future? Does USDA have the legal authority to attach conditions and restrictions, or even to block the commercialization of genetically engineered, herbicide-resistant crops? Will the agency use that authority?

Farmers have a long-term investment in their chief asset, their land. Chemical companies operate on a shorter horizon. Nature's reaction to farm practices since the introduction and marketing of genetically engineered, herbicide-resistant crops has created a temporary opportunity for chemical companies, an opportunity they will pursue at the long-term expense of the nation's farmers. Now, more than ever, farmers need to have a Department of Agriculture that takes care to preserve and protect the farming environment for generations to come.