PLANT BIOTECHNOLOGY

3 biotech scientists win World Food Prize

Instrumental in development of genetically modified crops

By David Pitt
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DES MOINES, IOWA | The World Food Prize Foundation on Wednesday took the bold step of awarding this year's prize to three pioneers of plant biotechnology whose work brought the world genetically modified crops.

The private nonprofit foundation, which is in part funded by biotechnology companies, refused to shy away from the controversy surrounding genetically modified crops that organic food advocates say are harmful to people and the environment.

"If we were to be deterred by a controversy, that would diminish our prize," said Kenneth Quinn, the foundation's president and a retired U.S. diplomat.

This year's award goes to Marc Van Montagu, founder and chairman of the Institute of Plant Biotechnology Outreach at Ghent University in Belgium; Mary-Dell Chilton, founder and researcher at Syngenta Biotechnology; and Robert Fraley, chief technology officer at Monsanto Co.

Mr. Van Montagu and Ms. Chilton independently developed the technology in the 1980s to stably transfer foreign genes into plants, a discovery that set up a race to develop tools to genetically engineer plants. It allowed other scientists to incorporate genetic traits in plants to better withstand drought and extreme heat and to fight off pests and disease. Mr. Fraley was the first to successfully transfer immunity to specific bacteria into a plant.

Mr. Fraley genetically engineered the first herbicide-resistant soybean in 1996.

The foundation lists Monsanto and Syngenta Foundation among its annual donors, along with other agribusiness corporations such as DuPont Pioneer, Archer Daniels Midland Co. and Cargill Inc.

The award drew immediate condemnation from opponents of corporate farming.

"We could not ask for a better poster child for what's wrong with the prize than the recipients of this year's World Food Prize," said Frank Cordaro, who organized an Occupy World Food Prize protest last year. "It's all part of the very same system of the corporate elite. The problem is not with the recipients, the problem is with the system that gives the 1 percent all the power and corporate agriculture is built on that system."

Genetically enhanced crops are grown on more than 420 million acres in nearly 30 countries by more than 17 million farmers, the foundation said. More than 90 percent are small, resource-poor farmers in developing countries.

Many U.S. farmers credited genetic modifications in corn with saving last year's crop from all but total devastation as half of the nation endured the worst drought in 60 years. Modern corn plants are more stable and can withstand a wider variety of climate conditions because of genetically improved leaves, roots and reproductive capability.

The World Food Prize was created in 1986 by Norman Borlaug, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to fight hunger. Borlaug was honored in 1970 for work that boosted agricultural production in what has become known as the "Green Revolution."

Recipients will receive the prize, which includes $250,000, at a ceremony in October at the Iowa Capitol in Des Moines attended by hundreds of scholars and agribusiness leaders from around the world.

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Robert Fraley (left) and Mary-Dell Chilton of the United States and Marc Van Montagu of Belgium were named Wednesday as winners of the 2013 World Food Prize during a ceremony in Washington.