

Biotech, data science take ag center stage

Monsanto execs discuss opportunities, challenges

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

ST. LOUIS — Population increase, world food demand, climate change, biotechnology and data science mean agriculture is “much more at center stage than it’s ever been,” Monsanto’s chairman and chief executive officer said.

“Sometimes we talk about farmers as if they were separate from society,” Hugh Grant said. “The reality is, they are at the heart of society.”

In wide-ranging talks with journalists touring Monsanto’s Chesterfield Village Research Facility outside St. Louis, Grant and other Monsanto executives fielded questions ranging from GMO controversies to the company’s attempt to buy rival Syngenta. Several acknowledged the company has been slow to engage GMO critics and was surprised by the vitriolic reaction to Monsanto’s work. Some said the company must become more transparent and better explain its role in agriculture.

“What we need to do a much better job on is explaining where food comes from, how food is produced and who’s producing it,” said Grant, a native of Scotland who became chairman and CEO in 2012.

Turning to trends, Grant said the westernization of Chinese diets, with more red meat consumption, drives the increased demand for corn as an



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Growth chambers at Monsanto’s Chesterfield Village research facility can duplicate any climate on earth.

imal feed. Of interest to Northwest growers, he said wheat has not kept pace with yield gains achieved in corn and soybeans and “needs some help.”

The company in July opened a wheat breeding and research facility in Filer, Idaho. Monsanto previously experimented with GMO wheat but dropped it when Pacific Northwest growers said their buyers, particularly in Asia, did not want it.

Eating habits

On other topics, Grant was asked about Monsanto’s responsibility for obesity and diabetes rates.

“My abilities to change

your eating habits are limited,” he said. “The tragedy today is you can have obesity and malnourishment coexistent.”

Robb Fraley, Monsanto’s chief technology officer and winner of the 2013 World Food Prize along with two others, said the world’s population is projected to top 10 billion by 2050.

The demand for food will double, and production will

have to double in the Americas and triple in Africa and Asia to keep pace, Fraley said.

“It will take all the tools that man can assemble,” he said.

On climate change, a 1- or 2-degree temperature rise won’t turn the Midwest into a desert but will usher in the rise of new pests, weeds and diseases, Fraley said.

But Fraley said biotechnol-

ogy and emerging data science give researchers the ability to respond by developing seeds “gene by gene” while farmers use drones, satellites and sensors to map fields “meter by meter.”

“The average tractor has more computer power in it than the first spaceship that went to the moon,” he said. “Better seeds and data are driving the next Green Revolution.”

Fraley said Monsanto is still interested in buying Syngenta and has sweetened its offer to the Swiss ag chemical company. Fraley said Monsanto would acquire Syngenta’s chemistry business and would sell off Syngenta’s seed busi-

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ness to assure competition. Critics say Monsanto is seeking a monopoly.

Other company executives who spoke during the event were Brett Begemann, president and chief operating officer, and Michael Frank, vice president of global commercial operations.

The 20 journalists attending were part of the National Press Foundation’s “Food, From Farm to Table” fellowship held July 19-22 in St. Louis. Monsanto was a sponsor of the fellowship, along with the Organic Trade Association, the American Farm Bureau Federation and the AARP Foundation, which includes senior nutrition among its concerns.

Monsanto’s sponsorship was criticized on social media. In a widely-shared post, the website Eater.com said associating with a “highly polarizing company with an aggressive PR agenda might not appear to be the most logical course of action for a journalism non-profit” such as the National Press Foundation.



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Michael Frank, Monsanto’s global corn breeding lead, walked reporters through greenhouses at the company’s Chesterfield Village research center.



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Monsanto Chairman and CEO Hugh Grant said biotechnology allows for “sustainable intensification” of agriculture.



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Monsanto was one of four sponsors of the National Press Foundation’s “Farm, From Food to Table” fellowship in St. Louis.

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