Sometimes, even very smart people don’t seem to connect the dots to see the bigger picture. But there are also times when that failure is deliberate. Which of those is responsible for the decision to award the World Food Prize to a Monsanto official?
The company’s chief technology officer is one of three biotechnology pioneers to be chosen for this year’s prize, the signature Iowa honor that is awarded annually in recognition of the father of the Green Revolution. The prize recognizes people who have helped feed the world’s hungry, yet many would argue Monsanto has, by its actions, jeopardized health, thwarted democracy and forced some farmers themselves into hunger.
The very fact that Monsanto money has flowed to the World Food Prize Foundation should make one if its own ineligible for the prize. But that’s the least of why the selection is inappropriate. Monsanto owns 90 percent of the world’s biotech seeds, and it needs neither the accolades nor a share in the $250,000 prize money. Its iron-fisted policies and aggressive lawsuits for patent infringement have hurt farmers in the United States and abroad while helping to pay for its research.
While the World Food Prize claims to promote a nutritious and sustainable food supply, biotech seeds are the antithesis of sustainability. They have to be purchased every year and cannot be saved and reused, as farmers have done for generations. Health and environmental concerns have caused several European and African countries to ban such seeds.
None of this is a secret. Just do an online search of Monsanto and see what comes up.
Let’s start with the film “The World According to Monsanto,” which opens with a farmer touting Roundup Ready soybeans in Iowa. The film goes on to describe how Monsanto got permission to bury PCBs in Anniston, Ala., causing decades of pollution, resulting in serious illness and deaths. Internal files show the company knew of the health hazards but covered them up. It paid $390 million to settle a lawsuit. It helps to have friends in high places, though. Check out the so-called “Monsanto Protection Act” that was slipped anonymously into a spending bill that averted a government shutdown. The “farmer assurance provision” limits judges’ ability to stop Monsanto from
“an outrageous example of a special interest loophole,” Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., plans to introduce an amendment to the farm bill overturning those protections.

Even as organic farmers in the United States find their crops threatened by cross pollination from GMO seeds, which compromises their ability to sell them, Monsanto sues farmers to whom that happens for using its seeds without paying. In one case, it sued an Indiana farmer all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled in the company’s favor, finding the farmer had no permission to replant a third generation of seeds that included some of Monsanto’s.

Monsanto doesn’t need the World Food Prize. It already has the U.S. government to do its bidding. Our State Department and embassies have actively promoted the company’s seeds and tried to squelch criticism of them, facilitating negotiations between Monsanto and foreign governments over patents and intellectual property issues. That happened even after Monsanto paid $1.5 million in fines over charges of bribing an Indonesian official and violating the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act in 2005. This came to light in nearly 1,000 diplomatic cables from 2005 to 2009 released by Wikileaks and publicized by the nonprofit consumer protection group Food & Water Watch. One 2009 cable from the American embassy in Spain sought “high-level U.S. government intervention” at the “urgent request” of Monsanto to combat biotech crop opponents there.

I hesitate to write all of this because I’m fond of Kenneth Quinn, the World Food Prize Foundation president and former U.S. ambassador to Cambodia. He has a big heart and a passion for what he does. But while the World Food Prize is said to honor people helping to feed the world’s hungry, in India, a rash of farmer suicides has resulted from their inability to feed even their own families thanks in part to GMOs. These farmers can’t afford costly Monsanto seeds or chemical pesticides and fertilizers, so they are driven to moneylenders charging exorbitant interest rates to compete with large farmers who can. Saddled with debt, some drink those poisonous chemicals to die.

These facts, the company’s unscrupulous behavior and the government’s coddling of it all leave me wondering why Monsanto deserves this prestigious prize — which Iowa taxpayer dollars help to support — and what’s expected in return.