

As drought hits corn, biotech firms see lush field in GMO crops

The worst U.S. drought in half a century is withering the nation's corn crop, but it's a fertile opportunity for makers of genetically modified crops.

Agricultural biotechnology companies have been pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into developing plants that can withstand the effects of a prolonged dry spell. Monsanto Co., based in St. Louis, has received regulatory approval for DroughtGard, a corn variety that contains the first genetically modified trait for drought resistance.

Seed makers, such as Pioneer Hi-Bred International Inc. of Johnston, Iowa, and Swiss company Syngenta, are already selling drought-tolerant corn varieties, conceived through conventional breeding.

At stake: a \$12-billion U.S. seed market, with corn comprising the bulk of sales. The grain is used in such things as animal feed, ethanol and food. The push is also on to develop soybean, cotton and wheat that can thrive in a world that's getting hotter and drier.

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