Sustainability proponents talk GMOs, health, superweeds and patents

As the legal frenzy makes clear, genetic engineering elicits extreme reactions. It's decried as humanity's final untethering from the natural world, or heralded as a solution to global problems like malnutrition and food insecurity.

To get beyond the hyperbole, In These Times brought together four experts on the risks and potential rewards of genetic engineering: Raoul Adamchak, who teaches organic farming at U.C. Davis and is the co-author of Tomorrow's Table: Organic Farming, Genetics and the Future of Food; Nina Fedoroff, an Evan Pugh Professor at Penn State and a former science and technology advisor to Secretaries of State Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton; Gregory Jaffe, the director of the Biotechnology Project at the Center for Science in the Public Interest; and Patty Lovera, the assistant director of Food & Water Watch.

To what extent is patenting genetically modified seeds driving this trend?

Nina: Everybody thinks patenting plant materials happened with GMOs, but it didn't. It goes back to the 1930s. Farmers in the developed world have been buying seeds from companies for many, many years.

Raoul: If you took genetically engineered seeds completely off the market, all the issues of seed consolidation would still exist.

Patty: We have a tremendously consolidated food system, from seeds all the way to meatpacking. We need some anti-trust enforcement throughout.

Nina: Bringing a single new variety to market costs upward of a hundred million dollars. That's not a cost that can be easily absorbed by anything but the big commodity crops and the big companies. If we want to see more beneficial traits that can reduce chemical use and be more environmentally sustainable, we have to somehow make it possible for academic scientists to get back into modifying crops for their local markets, even small specialty crops.

Read full, original article: Is There Anything Wrong with GMOs?