Gene Protection Technologies:
A Monsanto Background Statement

In recent months, there has been considerable publicity in a number of countries about a potential new plant technology dubbed the “terminator.” This technology is one of a class of so-called gene protection or gene control technologies, still in research and development, that may be used to control the germination of seeds produced by plants modified by biotechnology.

Monsanto has been the subject of much of that publicity because of our announced intention to purchase Delta and Pine Land Company (D&PL). D&PL, along with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, developed this particular gene protection technology.

The news stories and numerous interested parties have raised questions about the impact of such technologies on traditional farming methods and on the production of adequate food supplies to meet the anticipated increases in the world’s population.

Many seed companies around the world, as well as government and independent research institutions, are in some stage of research and development on gene protection technologies. We know of none, however, that have moved beyond the research and development phase. The securing of a patent related to these technologies is one part of any research and development effort, and does not predict commercial viability or acceptability.

Companies are researching these technologies because they believe they may provide a number of benefits, the primary benefit being protection of the investment required to develop the seeds. Such protection encourages more research and investment in future agricultural improvements and thereby would expedite access to the benefits of biotech seeds by farmers who want them.

At the same time, however, the fact that there is so much concern being expressed about this type of technology indicates that there are many who have serious misgivings about them and their potential impact on food production.

We believe that the concerns about gene protection technologies should be heard and carefully considered before any decisions are made to commercialize them.

We have conferred in the last several months with a number of international scientific and agricultural leaders about this situation including Ismail Serageldin of the World Bank, Professor Swaminathan of India, Calestous Juma, former head of the Secretariat for the Convention on Biodiversity, Jose Sarukhan, Director of CONABIO, the National Biodiversity Council in Mexico, and Jim Moody, President and CEO of InterAction, an umbrella organization representing 160 development and humanitarian aid organizations.

These individuals have been generous in their counsel and have recommended that thorough, independent and comprehensive consideration be given to the concerns raised about the impact of new gene protection technologies. We agree, and we are calling for just such consideration and public discussion, covering the full range of questions and issues that relate to the impact of these technologies on farming practices around the world.

One important issue, especially in developing countries, is that of small holder farmers who rely on saved seed to provide growing stock for the next year. We also hope that serious study and consideration will be given to the potential environmental, economic and social impacts of gene protection systems; how they should be developed; under what conditions or circumstances they should be utilized; and who should own them.

There is time for all aspects of this situation to be considered carefully, and in an open, comprehensive and consultative fashion. Experts agree that these systems are not expected to be ready for potential commercial use for at least five years.

It is important that the interests and perspectives of the food security and development communities be fully considered throughout the study and consultative process. In this connection, we are pleased that InterAction has agreed to work with its members and other groups to help achieve this objective. It is our hope...
that the many organizations interested in food security and development will contribute their expertise and perspectives.

Until a thorough, independent examination of gene protection systems has been conducted and all points of view considered, we will not attempt to commercialize these technologies. Moreover, in considering whether to commercialize such technologies, we will respond publicly and fully to the conclusions, opinions and arguments that are raised.

We believe in biotechnology and its potential to help address the very real and serious food and environmental demands facing the world, but we know that the success of biotechnology depends on its acceptance by farmers and the broader public. Many parties, both private and public, have an important stake in the issues surrounding gene protection technologies. We hope they will participate in a careful examination of those issues.