Corporations Boost Agricultural Research Funding

ALAN SCHER ZAGIER, Associated Press

The gap between federal support for agricultural research at large public universities and private investment continues to grow — and the divide comes with increased threats to academic freedom and more instances of meddling in the lab, a new research report suggests.

A recent study by Food and Water Watch, a Washington-based environmental group, shows that nearly one-quarter of the money spent on agricultural research at land-grant universities comes from corporations, trade associations and foundations, an all-time high. Financial support from the U.S. Department of Agriculture accounts for less than 15 percent, the lowest level in nearly two decades.

The consumer advocacy group's report is rife with what it calls examples of how corporate money "corrupts" the public research mission at land-grant schools, which were created by the Morrill Act of 1862. The law provided federal land for states to establish agriculture and engineering colleges.

The examples range from a University of Georgia food safety program that allows industry groups to join an advisory board in exchange for annual $20,000 donations to an Ohio State University professor whose research on genetically modified sunflowers was blocked by two seed companies after the initial results suggested the biotech sunflowers fostered the growth of weeds.

The report, entitled "Public Research, Private Gain," also explores the blurry lines created when universities and industry work hand-in-hand, such as when South Dakota State University sued farmers over wheat seed patents as part of a public-private coalition formed with a Monsanto Co. subsidiary. The Missouri-based company is known for aggressive litigation against what it calls seed piracy. Kansas State University, Colorado State and Texas A&M have pursued similar lawsuits.

Such alliances are a far cry from land-grant universities' historic role in promoting public knowledge and freely sharing the fruits of their research, said Patty Lovara, Food and Water Watch's assistant director. The report notes publicly funded university research led to the domestication of blueberries, early varieties of high-yield hybrid corn and common tools to fight soil erosion.

"There's a real sense in agriculture of what these schools used to be," Lovara said. "There was much more trust in what they put out. This is not the same research system of decades ago, and we're acting like it is."

Deans at several agricultural schools singled out for criticism in the report maintained that while corporate support is vital, it's unlikely to sway research results or even influence what research gets done.

"We're kind of caught between a rock and a hard place," said Thomas Payne, dean of the College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources at the University of Missouri. "In order for research to continue, we have to have support from a variety of sources."

Payne said industry support accounts for just 5 percent of the agricultural research budget at Missouri — though the Food and Water Watch report notes that the percentages were significantly higher in the university's plant sciences department (42 percent from 2007 to 2010) and its College of Veterinary Medicine (63 percent from 2004 to 2010).

Monsanto plays a prominent role on the Missouri campus, where science students attend lectures in Monsanto Auditorium — built in part with a $950,000 grant from the St. Louis company — and professors spin their university research off into

private companies at the Monsanto Place "life sciences business incubator," which was built with the help of a $2 million corporate grant.

The company and others in food and agriculture production have given substantial sums to other universities as well. There's a $1 million Monsanto Student Services Wing at Iowa State University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and a $250,000 endowed Monsanto chair in agricultural communications at the University of Illinois.

Cargill Inc. donated $10 million more than a decade ago for naming rights on a plant genomics building at the University of Minnesota, while two sensory labs at Purdue carry the imprimaturs of the Kroger Co. and ConAgra Foods Inc.

While the Food and Water Watch report suggests spending millions of dollars on building naming rights may also buy access to key decision makers, the donors and university officials say that's not true.

"In our experience, there is no correlation between naming rights and university research," Monsanto spokeswoman Sara Miller said.

Another Monsanto spokeswoman, Kelli Powers, said the company "is proud of its contributions to land-grant universities and support of university agricultural research," whether through naming rights or student scholarships.

Michael Doyle, a professor of food microbiology at Georgia and director of its Center for Food Safety, rejected the notion that companies such as Cargill, ConAgra and

the Coca-Cola Co. unduly influence the center's research agenda when they buy seats on the Board of Advisors.

"Industry does not tell me how to spend that money," he said, noting that corporate support accounts for just 10 percent of the program's research budget. "But I ask the industry, 'What are the areas you are interested in?'"

Those interests range from pathogen control to insider access to scientists and regulators from the Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control. Corporate partners are promised "special consideration" by Center for Food Safety faculty members, and the center's website reassures industry members that a prying press isn't allowed to attend those discussions.

"What we're trying to do is come up with practical ways the industry can make our food safer," Doyle added. "It's not specific to a company ... Sometimes the research doesn't work out the way the industry wants. We don't hold back."

With the current five-year farm bill set to expire at the end of September, Food and Water Watch wants Congress to boost the federal investment in campus agricultural research, with more resources steered toward sustainable methods, organic farming and reduced use of pesticides. The group also is calling for land-grant universities to more fully disclose gifts by private donors and wants agricultural research journals to adopt more stringent conflict-of-interest rules, similar to the recent crackdown by medical journals.

"This is a conversation that needs to be had about how we support this research," Lovara said. "There are a lot of consequences of land grant-funding of industry research that haven't been examined."

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Online: Food and Water Watch report, bit.ly/lhSATj

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