

Small Vermont organic farming community rallies against giant biotech agribusiness

Seed Keepers of Crescentville

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Prologue

Herbert M. Lundsted folded his personal transporter into his briefcase and entered the mezzanine of the Triple Helix Grand Hotel in Cincinnati. He boarded the elevator and pressed the button for the eighteenth floor, checking his reflection in the polished brass panel to his right. He looked every bit as brilliant as the background: chestnut hair perfect, lime green shirtfront crisp, amber freedom tie draped smartly, right shoulder to left hip. It was the image of a bright 21st century executive about to deliver good news to a conference room full of top executives and colleagues from around the world.

Herb liked being the bearer of good news. Sales in several product lines were exceeding projections in his territory, and he had the figures and charts to prove it. He was about to set company morale soaring and gain the respect and recognition he deserved—perhaps enough to propel him from Executive Director of Marketing for the Northeastern United States to Executive Director of Marketing, period.

The doors parted with a soft swish. Herb by-passed the complimentary coffee and croissant table and headed straight for the stage door of the H.R. Clinton Memorial Amphitheater. A scallop-shell arrangement of tilting padded seats fanned out before him, a massive projection screen looming overhead like a full sail. Herb stood a moment before the podium, then strode up the middle aisle and entered the rear glass-enclosed production room. He shook hands with the multi-media specialist and handed her a business card-sized jewel case containing the graphic images for his presentation. After a short discussion, he opened his briefcase, removed a large film canister, and passed it to her with a wink. The woman examined the label on the cylinder, nodded, and disappeared behind a large control board.

Herb inserted the tiny piece to his speech prompter into his left ear. Then he cued the programmer on his wrist as the muffled

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sound of voices and occasional laughter slowly filled the hall. At last, the woman emerged from behind the panel and gave Herb a thumbs-up. He tested his laser pointer, aiming it over the heads of the audience as they settled in their seats. A crimson arrow momentarily danced across the screen, then morphed into a vivid fireworks explosion. A few voices responded in hushed delight. By 9:45, the place was packed. He was prepared. This was to be the greatest presentation of his career.

Herb glanced at the conference agenda. He was last on the program. That was fine with him. Leave them with something to think about. He took his seat and practiced his Power Pause routines while the company CEO gave a brief welcome speech and introduced a documentary titled “Consumma and the World.”

The audience murmured as the broad domed ceiling came to life with close-up views of plump yellow grains of rice nodding gracefully in the paddies along Thailand’s Chao Phraga basin. Eager Indian farm workers were shown harvesting acres of perfect, bug-free cotton in the fields of Andhra Pradesh. Smiling families sold sugar and produce at a bustling marketplace in Mozambique.

Then came a history of Consumma Corporation, presented by International Director of Development, Manuel Suaves. “This is an exciting time for Consumma Corporation,” he said, blazing eyes scouring the room. “As the video you have just seen so clearly demonstrates, our endeavors in the field of biotech agriculture are gaining acceptance the world over. We are delighted to see this technology rebounding with such vigor after its near demise earlier this century.” He cast a grin toward the CEO as the audience began clapping.

“Prior to the turn of this century, the pioneers of our industry developed the technology to produce seeds designed to grow crops with built-in advantages, such as the ability to generate their own insecticide. Some of you may recall all too painfully the scare mongering that an over-zealous anti biotech lobby and the media engaged in during that time, and the negative impact it had on our entire industry. It took an intense concentrated effort and a new vision—the vision that became Consumma Corporation—to repair

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that damage. I'd like to personally thank everyone in this room who contributed so tirelessly toward that end. (More applause.)

"Today, corn, soy beans, lentils, wheat, potatoes, sugar beets, cotton, barley, alfalfa, canola, and rice, to name a few, are among the dozens of genetically enhanced crops grown here and abroad from Consumma's exclusive patented seeds. Our new Repel-R seeds have become the accepted first line of defense against the ravages of the European corn borer, root worm, cotton bollworm, budworm, and other destructive pests."

Suaves paused to take a pull on a bottle of Revit-Up. "Another highly successful product in our seed division has been the N-Circle Secure line—seeds genetically formulated to produce crops able to withstand even heavy doses of our extremely popular herbicide, N-Circle. As we all know, the demand for N-Circle soybeans has skyrocketed along with the urgent demand for biodiesel fuel and plant-based plastics. And of course, our line of bovine and other animal growth hormones is a huge success story." He rubbed his palms together. "So, ladies and gentlemen, this part of what I'm saying should come as no surprise to you: Consumma Corporation is now the leader in the global biotech arena." (A ripple of applause.) Suaves raised his voice. "But we must not become complacent! This company is about to encounter a new wave of public relations challenges in the United States."

The speaker drew a deep breath and studied a cage he'd made of his fingers as the audience shifted in their seats. "As some of you know, our pharmaceutical division, Hiccoprates, is growing by leaps and bounds. Through the miracle of transgenic manipulation, we are engineering plants that may soon fight some of the most devastating diseases known to humankind: Multiple Sclerosis, Parkinson's Disease, Alzheimer's, even HIV. But to raise these pharmaceutical crops, we need appropriate farmlands—acreage where the natural topography of the land lends itself to effective buffering, which, as you know, is essential to meeting federal requirements for segregation of biotech crops."

His bushy eyebrows appeared headed on a collision course. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have a concern that the local commu-

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nity support so essential to siting these test plots will be difficult if not impossible to find, as – long – as – Consumma’s – field – agents – are – still – engaged – in – chasing – down – local – growers – for – seed – pirating.”

A low murmur rose from the audience.

Suaves dug his elbows into his sides and spread his fingers, palms-up, as though holding a heavy rock. “Consumma Corporation wants to get out of the law enforcement business,” he said flatly. “The Food, Environment, Agriculture and Drug Supervisory of the United States, better known as FEADSUS, is more than willing to assist us in that effort. But we must do our part. And we have taken the first step.”

Suaves placed one foot in front of the other and clasped his hands together like a storyteller about to begin a fairy tale. “One of our most exciting projects over the past several years has been the development of our Cultivar Integrity Seed, or CIS program. As many of you know, this innovative program offers seeds for raising premium crops that are, by genetic design, unable to produce subsequent generations.” (A smattering of applause.)

“Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to announce the U.S. government approval, just yesterday, of Consumma’s first Cultivar Integrity pumpkinseed.”

Wild applause spiked from one corner of the room and spread throughout the auditorium, drowning out the speaker’s voice. Suaves smiled, nodding until it subsided, then continued. “Those of you who have been with this company a while needn’t be told how long and hard we’ve worked for this.”

Boisterous cheering again rang out from the corner.

“We hope and believe that yesterday morning’s green light is the first in a whole series of approvals for CIS technology in every major crop on the world market.”

He fanned away a repeat round of applause and smiled toward the corporate photographer snapping pictures in the front row. “Cultivar Integrity Seed program. Why do we call it that? Because we maintain that these genetically enhanced seeds yield dependable results—crops guaranteed to exhibit the traits they

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were bred for. No accidental hybridization. No localized adaptations. When consumers purchase CIS season after season, they purchase the assurance that their seeds will develop into exact replicas of the beautiful specimens pictured in their Consumma seed catalogs—not into strange aberrations dictated by the whims of Mother Nature.” Suaves raised an index finger. “That, we believe, is a substantial benefit for the consumer,” he said, accenting the final syllable. “Now, what’s in it for us, Consumma?

“Well, I’m sure you understand the obvious economic advantages of the CIS program—in terms of eliminating competition from seed-saving consumers, stimulating sales in all sectors of our business, and guaranteeing robust growth to this corporation for decades to come. Now, let’s add to that the cost avoidance factor.” He grasped both sides of the podium. “My friends, the cost of defending our ever-increasing stockpile of seed patents from infringement is becoming prohibitive. Our highly paid team of enforcement and legal experts is well-deserving, but frankly, Consumma would rather put its money back into agricultural pursuits. With the systematic phase-out of seed-saving that we anticipate from the CIS program, this company will be free to concentrate its talents and financial resources on the research and development of important industrial and pharmaceutical crops,” said Suaves, “NOT on the expensive policing and litigation of those who would violate our hard-earned seed patents!” He grinned broadly and mopped his forehead as a wave of applause swept the room. “CIS is our ticket out of the law enforcement business, and into the exciting future of biotech agriculture!” An explosion of applause ensued.

“Now here’s the challenge,” he said quietly. “As I mentioned earlier, transgenic plantations, by law, have specific site requirements. We cannot cultivate the vast open fields of our Midwestern states for this purpose, due to the threat, or perceived threat, of gene flow from open pollinating plants. We need numerous smaller tracts of land where the inherent geological features offer natural buffering for required crop segregation. We believe much of that type of acreage exists in the Northeast United States—

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where abundant rolling hills, mountains, forests, ponds, lakes, and rivers may serve this purpose. That, ladies and gentlemen, is why we must overcome the very difficult challenge of selling New Englanders, who have historically been biotech's toughest customers, on the CIS program."

Herb Lundsted leaned forward in his seat, his heart racing.

Suaves pushed a stray strand of hair off his forehead and summarized: "When New Englanders come to appreciate the quality cultivars offered only through CIS, and the entire Northeast is weaned off its home-grown seed supply—and we have every confidence that our marketing team up there can accomplish that—those consumers will happily return to our distributors year after year for Consumma seeds. And never again will we have to waste precious time, resources, and personnel on the pursuit and litigation of seed pirates. Most importantly, the small farming communities we so desperately need as allies WILL NO LONGER PERCEIVE US AS THE ENEMY. We hope you will join us in celebrating yesterday's landmark CIS approval, for it is our key to the greatest advances in biotech agriculture known to the modern world."

The applause swelled and boiled over like a pan of scalded milk. When it finally simmered down, Suaves swung out one arm and introduced the first of the regional marketing directors, Arnie Ross, representing the Midwest. Ross was an achiever; Herb would grant him that. But the successful marketing of state-of-the-art agricultural technology in Arnie's district did not require half the effort it did in the Northeast. Midwestern farmers were progressive. They operated on a grand scale. They'd been the first to embrace genetically enhanced BT crops and were now the major U.S. purchasers of our herbicide-resistant N-Circle Secure seeds, along with a huge volume of the N-Circle herbicide itself. Selling them on CIS would be like giving candy to a baby.

Besides, Herb Lundsted had more pressing things on his mind. Manuel Suaves's speech kept running through his head like a closed loop of vintage recording tape. Its message had swept through the conference center like a speeding semi, and Herb intended to take full advantage of the back draft. He stretched out

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his left elbow and pulled up the magnifying frame from his wrist programmer. Then he retrieved its slender microstylus from his shirt pocket and began feverishly tapping it on the screen. It was an on-the-fly revision of his entire presentation. He would focus on marketing the new Cultivar Integrity Seed program in the Northeast.

Herb hurried back to the production room and had a brief discussion with the multi-media specialist. Then he returned to re-cue his speech prompter and re-sequence his graphics throughout the next three presentations. He finished just in time to hear Public Relations Director Julia Petrillo wrapping up a rousing pep talk. “We are conquering hunger in the world. We have every right to be proud!” she shouted, swirling both fists through the air as if erasing an invisible white board. The applause droned on.

At last, it was Herb’s turn. He padded up the aisle, climbed the carpeted steps to the podium, and slowly turned toward the sea of faces. He began shaking his head up and down in silence. After several long seconds, he said, “Manny Suaves was right. Them Yankees are a stubborn lot.”

The crowd broke into laughter. Suaves was leaning out from his seat in the front row, laughing heartily toward a colleague who was doing the same from a few seats down. Herb maintained a comical expression of resignation until the laughter died down, then said, “I can say that. . . . I’m from Boston.” He pointed a finger at the audience. “But you can’t!” Another burst of laughter. “And speaking of not being able to say something—I always thought we were consummER and our CUSTOMERS were consumAH’s. Folks down here can’t pronounce anything right!” The crowd was roaring now. He had them where he wanted them—relaxed and receptive.

“Of course, I jest,” he said. “But there may be some truth to the notion that the Northeast sales district has been somewhat slow to accept modern advances in biotech agribusiness. It’s also true that New Englanders are an intelligent, practical people. They need a logical reason to change their ways. Well, I’ll tell you something. You show a bushel of perfect CIS potatoes to a Maine potato farmer and he’s going to like what he sees. Then he’s going to

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think, hey—maybe I can't replant these tubers—but I think my customers are going to like a sproutless potato!" Herb thought he caught a glimpse of the CEO nodding enthusiastically to his neighbor. "Now that's a real wintah keepah!" Herb added in his best Down-Easter accent. Uproarious laughter. The audience was enjoying this.

"So how do we get the good word out about CIS in the Northeast? Folks, in the coming months, we're going to get beautiful samples of each newly approved CIS-grown product to every farmer's market, Grange hall, roadside farm stand, and county fair throughout New England. Because that's where our picky shoppers look. And when they see better-looking produce alongside their standard fare, they are going to demand it. And the farmers are going to want to plant it."

"I'll show you what happens after that, but first, let's take a look at what's happening right now." He nodded over his shoulder toward the assistant in the production booth. All heads went up as the image of a huge map of the New England states unfurled overhead. It showed the breakdown of total Consumma marketing activity in Herb's region, with all the active farming counties highlighted in phosphorescent green. Pockets of green clustered in several tobacco-growing areas of Connecticut, while scattered patches in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire represented mainly apple and berry orchards, and the thriving horticultural business. The green areas in Maine stood largely for blueberry and potato farms, while the state showing by far the most green was, aptly, the Green Mountain state of Vermont.

Printed below were the percentages of total regional sales of Consumma products attributed to each county over the past year. The figures ranged from a high of 37 percent for Casper County, the hub of the Vermont dairy industry, to a low of only one point six percent for Hope Springs County—ironically, Casper's next-door neighbor. Herb clicked his remote and the map rolled into a thin scroll and vanished.

Next, a series of brilliantly colored pie charts drifted in, comparing Consumma sales activity in each of the New England states

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with that of the company's top five competitors. After that, another set of charts swirled in, tracking Consumma's growth in the region from the company's inception to the present. For the next 15 minutes, a dazzling array of animated charts and graphs spun and zoomed, divided and regrouped, illustrating a dizzying spate of statistics that hammered home two main points:

Despite a sluggish start, Consumma Corporation was indeed making inroads to the Northeast.

Gains following establishment of the CIS program in New England would prove exponential the world over.

It was now time to put everything in perspective. Herb took a step back and made eye contact with the multi-media specialist. A narrow stream of intense white light beamed upward from the production booth, and the holographic version of the company's global sales distribution chart materialized. The luminous, three-dimensional pie looked real enough to touch and taste. The audience stilled in awe.

The pie was sliced into colored sections labeled with the name of each nation currently trading with Consumma Corporation. Printed below the countries were net profit figures—Herb's own fresh-baked projections of Consumma's emerging seed market and ancillary product sales over the next five years. The results were then compounded by an estimated \$7.1 billion in revenues previously lost to seed-saving farmers worldwide. "These are the kind of net profit figures we anticipate seeing within five years of introducing CIS to the Northeast," Herb said. As a grand finale, he directed a fireworks laser image at the figures, leaving them glowing seductively.

Herb's presentation was complete. The audience sat mesmerized by the pie soaring above them—solitary, ponderous, with every section filled in, spoken for, as if all competing interests no longer existed. As if it represented the single source of food, medicine, and fuel production for the entire world. As if it contained the future of agriculture, and none but Consumma would ever again have a piece of it.

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Herb folded his arms across his chest and gazed up at his handiwork. He nodded triumphantly. "World, prepare to meet our new 'Cis!'" A flurry of good-natured guffaws issued from the audience. Then thunderous applause. He'd done it. "Thank you," he said, beaming. "Thank you very much." As an afterthought he added, "Are there any questions?"

Heads swiveled and necks craned for several moments. Then a woman in the center pod pressed the response button on the arm of her chair. The on-stage directional microphone swiveled and focused on her, simultaneously aiming a pool of light at the small oval face of Amanda Toy, Executive Director of Global Marketing. "Just one," she shouted a bit too loudly. "What are we doing wrong in Hope Springs County Vermont?"

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