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Conflict in the Plains?

BY KATE MATERNOWSKI

As a major agribusiness firm, Monsanto has a deep and abiding interest in the research operations of rural universities like South Dakota State University, providing grants and entering into contracts totaling hundreds of thousands of dollars. That is exactly why some at the university are so concerned that Monsanto has put South Dakota State's president on its Board of Directors and will give him a compensation package worth more than his university salary this year.

Monsanto, the St. Louis agricultural company, appointed South Dakota State's president, David Chicoine, to its Board of Directors last month. Effective April 15, Chicoine began service on the Public Policy and Corporate Responsibility Committee and the Science and Technology Committee of Monsanto's board.

Officials at the university and Monsanto applaud the appointment, saying that Chicoine's background in agricultural economics – he holds four degrees in that discipline, including a Ph.D. from the University of Illinois – will prove a valuable asset to Monsanto. And it is beneficial for the university, said Tad Perry, executive director of the South Dakota Board of Regents, because it's "good for higher education to be connected to the real world, the outside world."

But some faculty members and students at South Dakota State see a potential conflict of interest in the president's appointment to the board of a private company that routinely does business with the large, public research university he oversees.

According to documents filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission, Monsanto has paid South Dakota State about \$54,000 for services and has received an estimated \$216,000 from the university for licenses, services and goods since the 2008 fiscal year. Research grants, including a March gift of \$1 million to start a plant-breeding fellowship, add to the total amount of money exchanged.

Additionally, Monsanto will pay Chicoine \$195,000 annually and provide a one-time stock grant option to match. His total first-year compensation will top his South Dakota State salary – about \$320,000 – by more than \$50,000.

While service of university officials to the boards of private companies is far from foreign in academe – Monsanto's board previously included a Stanford University dean and currently boasts an Arizona State University scientist – it is Monsanto's vested interest in South Dakota State's agricultural research and programming that worries some faculty members and students.

Doug Malo, president of the Academic Senate, told the Associated Press that concerns raised by faculty since the appointment center on the ability of university researchers to pursue work and publish findings that might be unfavorable to Monsanto.

And a member of the university's Student Association had similar concerns when he introduced a resolution to the student governing board disapproving of the president's Monsanto appointment. Shawn Mohr, a junior agronomy major, said that Chicoine's board seat will "make our research seem tainted, to the producers, other agricultural companies, and counterpart universities."

Mohr went on to say that, beyond research independence and institutional reputation, students in particular could stand to be hurt in the long run.

“There was concern by students that other agronomic companies, because of the administrative ties to Monsanto, may not pursue them as heavily,” he said in an e-mail message.

But Chicoine told the Associated Press that his board service at Monsanto will not hurt South Dakota State, and assured Malo that university researchers will continue to enjoy the freedom to publish their findings.

The South Dakota Board of Regents agreed, approving Chicoine’s service to Monsanto after the president asked the board to review the appointment. “The board policy requires a reportage of any conflict of interest on an annual basis,” which is how the board first learned of the appointment, Perry said.

The regents will continue to monitor the relationship in the future, he added. “The key is to disclose these things, to be transparent.”

Notes

¹<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/05/07/dakota>