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In advance of the state's next legislative session two midwestern farmers traveled East this week to share their hard won knowledge of the risk and cost of GMO crops.

Speaking at Middlebury's public library North Dakota soybean farmer Rodney Nelson joined Missouri farmer Bill Christison with Bill Wenzel of the Minnesota based group Farmer to Farmer in a lively two and a half hour discussion hosted by the advocacy group Rural Vermont.

Clear in his agenda Wendell stated that his mission and that of the others at his side is to help farmers organize to stop corporate control of agriculture.

Before turning the floor over to Christison, Wenzel suggested that audience members introduce themselves. Those attending included retired farmer and Rural Vermont board member Ron Morrisette, brewer Morgan Wolaver, veterinarian Donald Hunt and his wife a nurse, a soil scientist, and Progressive Party Treasurer and gardener Mike Bayer of Monkton, as well as several members of Addison County's GE-Free group and others who as one woman explained "just want to know what they are eating."

Christison, who identified himself as a fourth generation farmer, began by saying he has been working on agricultural issues for a long time. His purpose in Vermont he said, "was to present a model of how organizing can work."

Using Missouri's effort to resist takeover by industrialized hog farming as an example, Christison laid out a specific prescription for Vermonters intent on facing down growing pressure to embrace genetically engineered crop varieties and the chemicals and legal obligations associated with their production.

To be successful in resisting corporate control, said Christison, Vermont's farmers must raise awareness, must reach out to environmental groups and others to establish a broad base, and above all they must raise money.

Keeping Christison's pace, Rodney Nelson, told of the legal battle with Monsanto Company that resulted from his hopeful but cautious trial use of

Monsanto's patented RoundUp Ready soybean in 1998.

According to Nelson, his family purchased the GMO seed, signed Monsanto's technology agreement, paid the user fee and gave the soybean a try on a small field they mostly wanted to rid of weeds.

Expecting yield drag he wasn't surprised by the poor harvest. But he decided not to plant the same seed the following season. Instead he decided to wait for a more suitable GM variety.

Nonetheless, one year later, after sending inspectors out to the Nelson farm in late November to pull samples, Monsanto filed a suit against the Nelsons accusing them of violating its patent rights.

Despite the Nelsons' ability and willingness to supply them seed, chemical and elevator receipts for the 1998 crop - evidence that no seed was saved for replanting - Monsanto proceeded with a legal assault that lasted two years. Monsanto eventually settled.

The North Dakota Seed Arbitration Board heard the Nelsons' case and ruled in the Nelsons' favor. "The judge presiding said that, Monsanto's case was ridiculous and that Monsanto was operating in North Dakota in bad faith," Nelson told listeners.

Monsanto for its part refused to attend the hearing and subpoenaed all who had attended.

"We fought Monsanto because we knew we didn't do what they claimed we did," said Nelson. "As a matter-a-fact this Illinois attorney who has successfully represented farmers in similar cases, says Monsanto singled us out because we fit their profile."

According to the attorney, the Nelsons, one of North Dakota's largest family farms, with an operation of over 9,000 acres total, are the perfect vehicle for Monsanto's scare tactics. Their message is clear, says Rodney, "plant GMO and pay our fees or get sued."

But Amy Shollenberger of Rural Vermont and those participating in the Farmer to Farmer Campaign see another option for Vermont farmers - organize now and support the GMO liability legislation being brought before the assembly in the upcoming session.

The bill has sponsors in both the House and the Senate but needs strong support from the public to be voted in. If passed the legislation will go a long way

in establishing vital protection for farmers.