If Secretary of State John Kerry’s G.M.O.-boosting speech announcing the World Food Prize at the State Department last week is any indication of his ability to parse complicated issues, he might be better off windsurfing. Because Kerry appears to have bought into the big ag-driven myth that only by relying on genetic engineering will we be able to feed the nine billion citizens of our planet by 2050. And he enthusiastically endorsed granting this mockery of a prize to three biotech engineers, including Robert Fraley, executive vice president and chief technology officer at Monsanto and a pioneer of genetic engineering in agriculture.

Never mind that Monsanto is a sponsor of the prize (and that the list of other backers reads like a who’s who of big ag and big food), or that we never get to know the names of either the nominees or the nominators. Never mind that we’re not feeding the seven billion now, or that we’re sickening a billion of those with a never-before-seen form of malnourishment. Never mind that we already grow enough food to feed not only everyone on the planet but everyone who’s going to be born in the next 30 or 40 years. And never mind that, despite the hype, there’s scant evidence that the involvement of genetic engineering in agriculture has done much to boost yields, reduce the use of chemicals or improve the food supply.

The carping ends here. (I wrote about genetic engineering recently, and anyway, you’ll find plenty of griping about this prize elsewhere.) Rather, I thought I might ask a few friends and colleagues for their opinions on who might qualify for a food prize that wasn’t sponsored by its recipients.

There already is such a thing, of course: the Food Sovereignty Prize. But I’m countering the tremendous public relations boost Monsanto received from the World Food Prize, and instead showcasing just a few of the many people around the world who are working to establish sustainable and fair food systems.

Doug Gurian-Sherman, a plant pathologist at the Union of Concerned Scientists, mentioned Zeyaur Khan, who developed the “push-pull” system of pest control in sub-Saharan Africa. The system uses a legume to “push” stem borers away from desired crops (mostly corn); at the same time, a “pull” crop is planted nearby, one that attracts the stem borers. “Input costs are low for farmers using this system,” says Gurian-Sherman, “while yields are often more than doubled.” Neither of those things can be said of the genetically modified Bt corn, which is designed to achieve the same results.
Raj Patel, author of "Stuffed and Starved" and a fellow at the Institute for Food and Development Policy, talked about the international peasant organization, La Via Campesina: “At their 20th anniversary meeting earlier this month, La Via Campesina put violence against women at the forefront of their concerns around food sovereignty.” (Sixty percent of the world’s undernourished people are female.) “That’s a very 21st century understanding of how hunger works, and how to end it,” he said. “And it’s far more powerful than the World Food Prize’s magic-beans talk.”

Anna Lappé, director of Food MythBusters and author, most recently, of “Diet for a Hot Planet,” nominates the United Nations special rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, a tireless traveler who has visited dozens of countries to learn about and address food insecurity.

“De Schutter’s promotion of agroecological solutions,” says Lappé, “is rooted in the understanding that the chemical approach breeds debt and dependency on costly inputs like fertilizer, chemicals or genetically engineered seeds. As he told me a few years ago, ‘We have failed to end hunger using the traditional recipe that saw hunger as a technical problem, requiring only that we produce more. We’ve failed because we’ve underestimated the need to empower people and hold governments accountable.’”

Speaking of Lappés, Tom Philpott, a food and agriculture writer at Mother Jones, brings up Anna’s mother, Frances Moore Lappé: “Her central insights in “Diet for a Small Planet” — that growing grain to feed animals for meat is grievously inefficient; that the world already produces more than enough calories and the real problem is economic inequality — have become so commonplace in alternative-ag circles, so accepted, that we forget where they came from. (Now if policy makers would only listen!) She is an unsung intellectual giant, and her work remains vital today.”

Finally, Michael Pollan, Knight professor of journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, and author, most recently, of “Cooked,” speaks about Miguel Altieri, an agronomist at Berkeley and one of the world’s leading proponents of agroecology.

“Altieri has shown that casting the future of farming as either low-yield subsistence agriculture or export-oriented industrial farming is a false choice,” Pollan says. “Working with peasant farmers in Latin America, he has demonstrated that impressive increases in yield can be achieved by means of crop diversification, integrated pest management, and nutrient cycling. Small-holder farms currently produce half the world’s food, and Altieri’s work suggests that they could produce considerably more without shifting to capital-intensive export crops that often undermine rural economies and diminish food security. Altieri is also an eloquent advocate of ‘food sovereignty,’ the principle that localities and nations should be able to retain control of their food systems rather than leave them at the mercy of the global market.”

That’s hardly it: Without thinking hard, I could speak of Lester Brown, founder of both Worldwatch and the Earth Policy Institute; Matt Liebman of Iowa State, whose
pioneering work on sustainable agriculture I wrote about last year; and Vandana Shiva, who has devoted her life to so many progressive environmental and agricultural causes one doesn’t know where to begin.

In this day hunger comes not because there is not enough food; it comes because some are unable to either buy it or produce it. Hunger represents inequality: there are no hungry people with money. Alleviating hunger, in part, is recognizing that the right to eat is equivalent to the right to breathe, which trumps the right to make profits. The real heroes in the world of food are those who recognize this, and who work to improve the kind of low-input agriculture upon which the majority of the world’s people — and the vast majority of farmers — rely. There are hundreds of people deserving of “prizes” for this kind of work. The bigwigs at Monsanto are not among them.

1. “Similar to the Nobel Prizes,” a World Food Prize spokesperson e-mailed me when I inquired.

2. Part of the problem, it seems to me, is that because the involvement of genetic engineering in agriculture is actively supported by the Federal government, we tend to forget there is a bigger, global picture. It’s hard to believe that any organization in the European Union, for example, would be silly enough to give an award for genetically engineered crops — since they’re barely grown there. And, by the way, their agricultural yields are as good as ours.

3. See Doug’s post about the World Food Prize.

4. Called desmodium, or tick-trefoil, if you’re interested. Planting legumes, of course, also fixes nitrogen in the soil, which means lowered use of chemical fertilizers.

5. Who is a friend.

6. Which won the first Food Sovereignty Prize.