

For European Chemical Giants, Brazil Is an Open Market for Toxic Pesticides Banned at Home

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Brazil is the world's largest user of pesticides, including more than a dozen considered highly hazardous, thanks to permissive legislation that allows some of Europe's biggest agrochemical companies to continue selling products that have been banned in their home market.

The toxicity of these pesticides has raised concerns: 22 of them are classified as highly hazardous pesticides, or HHPs, by the Pesticide Action Network (PAN), a global coalition that advocates for eco-friendly alternatives to chemical pesticides. The classification is based on criteria developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO): in humans, they can be toxic to the reproductive system, damaging to DNA, or carcinogenic, as well as fatal to bees and other pollinators.

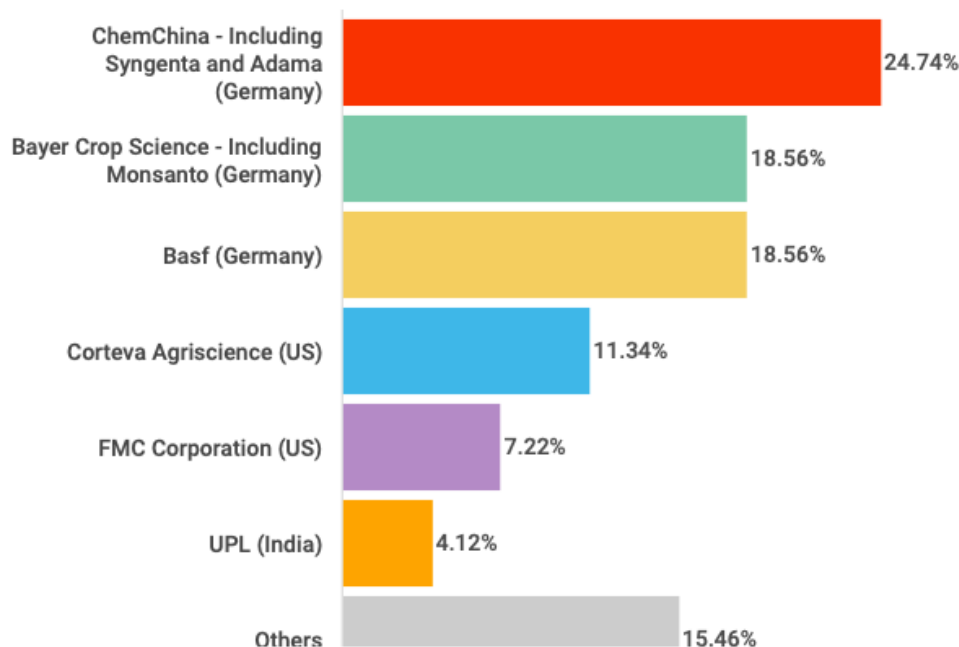
Even though these products have been banned in other countries, companies like Bayer, BASF and Syngenta make millions of dollars selling them in Brazil. According to IBAMA, the Brazilian environmental agency, more than 63,000 tonnes of just 10 of these 22 pesticides were sold in 2018. Sales of the other 12 products were not reported because of commercial confidentiality; IBAMA only discloses data on active ingredients manufactured by three or more companies. It also doesn't break down the amounts sold by each company.

The companies

The global pesticide market generated \$ 34.4 billion in 2017, according to the FAO. And the industry is increasingly controlled by a handful of companies. Headquartered in Switzerland, Syngenta is part of the ChemChina group, a world leader in the sector. German company Bayer comes second. It experienced massive growth in 2018 after acquiring Monsanto, which produces Roundup, a herbicide based on glyphosate, the world's best-selling pesticide. Rounding out the top three is Germany's BASF. Together, [the three companies control 54.7%](#) of the global agrochemical industry.

Market leaders

The global pesticide trade generated more than \$ 34 billion in revenues in 2017. A small number of companies kept the largest share.



In 2018, 36.7% and 24.9% of the active ingredients sold worldwide by Bayer and BASF respectively were highly hazardous under the PAN definition, according to a [report](#) that lists German agrochemical companies' sales to developing countries. The report was prepared by the Permanent Campaign Against Pesticides, INKOTA Network, Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, MISEREOR and South African organization Khanyisa.

According to the study, more flexible registration procedures make it easier for highly hazardous pesticides to enter markets in the global South. Brazil is a case in point: [44% of the substances registered here have been banned in the European Union](#), according to a report released in July by the former president of the Brazilian Association for Agrarian Reform (ABRA), Gerson Teixeira.

Alan Tygel, a spokesman for the Campaign Against Pesticides and For Life, explains why the study began with Germany:

“The country is the world’s second-largest pesticide exporter because of these two major manufacturers. It exports 233 active ingredients — nine of which are banned in the EU but produced in Germany and then exported.

“Of the 233 active ingredients exported by Germany, 62 are considered highly hazardous,” he adds.

The report shows that half of the 24 ingredients sold by Bayer and BASF in Brazil are highly hazardous. One of them is Fipronil, an active ingredient used in insecticides marketed by BASF. The product entered PAN’s list for its fatal effects on bees. In the 1990s, it was blamed for a massive bee die-off in France. In 2017, millions of chicken eggs were

contaminated by Fipronil in Belgium and the Netherlands. That same year, the product was banned from the entire EU for posing “high acute risks for bees [when used as] seed treatment in maize,” according to the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA).

In Brazil, beekeepers list it as the main cause of the [deaths of more than 500 million bees](#) in 2018-2019. According to IBAMA, 1,600 tonnes were sold in the country in 2018 alone, to be used in the cultivation of cotton, potatoes, soybeans and corn.

Another controversial item on the list is the fungicide Carbendazim from Bayer, which has been banned from the European market since 2016. Its potential harms include genetic defects, impaired fertility, and fetus problems, in addition to being very toxic to bodies of water, according to the Campaign Against Pesticides report. The product is also on PAN’s list because it can damage DNA and be toxic to the reproductive system.

According to IBAMA, Carbendazim sales in Brazil amounted to 4,800 tonnes in 2018. In December last year, the country’s National Health Regulatory Agency (ANVISA) started reevaluating it to decide whether it should remain on the market. The process is slow and may take more than a decade, as happened recently with glyphosate, whose registration was renewed after 11 years under reevaluation. In the meantime, Carbendazim continues to be sold for the cultivation of black beans, soybeans, wheat and oranges.

The report calls on the German government to ban exports of pesticide active ingredients that are not allowed in the EU. “We do not have data on which company produces imported substances or to which countries they are exported,” says German researcher Lena Luig, from the INKOTA Network, one of the contributors to the report.



A more flexible pesticide registration procedure makes it easier for highly hazardous pesticides to enter certain countries, such as Brazil. Image Matheus Cenali/Pexels.

Syngenta makes billions from selling hazardous pesticides to poor countries,

study says

Last year, the Swiss NGO Public Eye released a [report](#) showing how Syngenta makes billions of dollars selling highly dangerous pesticides, particularly to low- and middle-income countries. Those same pesticides are banned in Switzerland, Syngenta's home country.

Using exclusive data provided by leading agribusiness intelligence company Phillips McDougall, Public Eye estimates that Syngenta made some \$3.9 billion by selling highly hazardous pesticides in 2017 — more than 40% of its pesticide sales that year.

About two-thirds of these sales were made in low- and middle-income countries, with Brazil the largest individual market.

According to the report, “51 of the 120 pesticide active ingredients in Syngenta's portfolio are not authorized for use in its home country, Switzerland; 16 of them were banned because of their impact on human health and the environment. But Syngenta continues selling them in lower income countries.”

The report lists 10 active ingredients sold by the company in Brazil that are banned in the EU and appear on PAN's highly hazardous list. One of them is the herbicide Atrazine, the fourth-most-used pesticide in Brazil, with 287,000 tonnes sold in 2018, according to IBAMA.

The product is used in the cultivation of sugarcane, corn and sorghum. It was banned from the EU for causing endocrine disorders that affect the hormonal system. “Atrazine has been banned in Switzerland and the EU for many years because of its far-reaching and enduring contamination of drinking water sources,” says Carla Hoinkes, an agricultural researcher at Public Eye and one of the report's authors.

Another best seller on the list is Paraquat, the sixth-most-used pesticide in Brazil, with 13,100 tonnes sold. Due to its high toxicity, it has been banned in Switzerland since 1989 and in the EU since 2017. “Paraquat is so toxic that accidental ingestion of a single sip may kill you. It is now banned in more than 55 countries, but Syngenta keeps selling it where it is still allowed,” Hoinkes says.

In 2017, Brazilian health regulator ANVISA decided that Paraquat should be removed from the country's market. The ban is due to start on Sept. 22 this year, but faces strong lobby efforts by the agribusiness industry, [which has formed a “Paraquat task force” to try to reverse the decision](#).

Data on sales of one of Syngenta's main products, the insecticide Thiamethoxam, are not publicly available due to trade secrets. A member of the neonicotinoid insecticide family, it is fatal to pollinators such as bees. “Syngenta's thiamethoxam, as well as Bayer's Imidacloprid [which sold 10,000 tonnes in Brazil in 2018], is a ‘bee killing’ neonicotinoid insecticide that was banned from European and Swiss fields in 2018, after a long legal battle,” Hoinkes says. “According to FAO and WHO, a growing body of evidence suggests that neonicotinoid insecticides ‘are causing harmful effects to bees and other beneficial insects on a large scale.’”

Companies say there are no risks

Pesticide manufacturers have no problem with selling in Brazil products that have been banned in Europe.

According to BASF, there are major differences in crops, soil, climate, pests, and agricultural practices around the world.

“Different pests require different solutions, and all BASF products are extensively tested, evaluated and approved by each country’s competent authorities, following official and legal procedures established in the respective countries before being marketed,” the company said in a statement.

It also said that for market reasons it chose not to renew the registrations of some active ingredients in Europe. “In many cases, the active ingredient is not renewed or registered in Europe because the occurrence of pests, diseases and weeds in a temperate climate does not justify it or because there is no economically important crop.” Of the 12 ingredients produced by BASF and cited in the Campaign Against Pesticides report, only Saflufenacil has never had a license requested for the European market. The others were either never authorized or ended up being excluded from that market after reevaluations.

Bayer said the lack of approval for a given pesticide in the EU “in no way determines its safety” and that “it does not mean a double standard.”

“Our internal safety requirements ensure that our products meet minimum global standards everywhere, regardless of how developed and rigorous each country’s regulatory system may be. Since 2016, Bayer has pledged to sell only crop protection products whose active ingredients are registered in at least one OECD country,” the company said.

Syngenta said it is important to consider differences in agricultural practices around the world, including the types of crops grown and the conditions to which they are exposed, as well as the types of pests. “Products used in [Brazil], with a tropical climate and under high pressure from pests and diseases, may not be so necessary in countries where harsh winter conditions — often marked by snow — naturally reduce pest pressure. In other words, if there is no demand for a certain pesticide, there is no need to register or renew the product’s registration in that country,” it said.

CropLife Brasil, an association of pesticide manufacturers that includes Bayer, BASF and Syngenta, said the report ignores that proper use of pesticides is critical in determining its toxicity to users, their families, and consumers. “Agricultural conditions regarding flora, fauna and climate in different countries result in a wide variety of insects/pests, weeds and diseases that affect plants. This means that different pesticides will be available to farmers in Europe and other regions. Therefore, the fact that a crop protection product is not approved in the EU in no way determines its safety,” CropLife said in a statement.

Hoinkes said there is a case to be made for specific agronomic needs, but not much. “In most cases it is proven that the EU has banned or severely restricted the use of a pesticide or group of pesticides due to concerns about the environment or human health,” she says.

She cites the examples of Fipronil, Paraquat, Atrazine and Thiamethoxam.

“So companies like Syngenta or Bayer are indeed using ‘double standards’ for different countries — due to weaker regulations or poor enforcement in certain political contexts — to continue selling highly hazardous pesticides banned in

their own territories because they are acutely toxic to humans, kill bees, persist in drinking water or are suspected of causing cancer, birth defects or other chronic diseases.”

Asked if they believe that there are risks in permitting domestic sales of products banned in the EU and if these bans are taken into account during pesticide evaluation, Brazil’s Ministry of Agriculture (MAPA) said the country is “sovereign to regulate” and has the technical expertise to analyze pesticides. “If they are sold here, it means that they have been rigorously analyzed by MAPA, ANVISA and IBAMA, and were approved by each of these agencies according to their respective competencies.” [Read the full statement from Brazil’s Ministry of Agriculture.](#)

The companies also questioned PAN’s criteria for classifying pesticides as highly hazardous. Acute toxicity, chronic health damage, environmental hazards, and being listed in international conventions and agreements for the regulation of pesticides are evaluated. [PAN’s list currently includes 310 active ingredients.](#)

BASF says that concepts sustained by NGOs such as PAN “impose restrictions beyond those established by internationally recognized government agencies such as FAO and WHO.” Neither the FAO nor the WHO are government agencies. The company also said that “regulatory agencies in each country are the best judges of their regions’ needs.”

Syngenta said that PAN’s list “is not recognized by any national or international organization.” The company added that Public Eye, the Swiss NGO that published the critical report, “seeks to undermine innovation agriculture, without which food would be scarcer, more expensive and less safe.”

Alan Tygel of the Campaign Against Pesticides says the PAN list is based on criteria defined in 2006 by two U.N. agencies: the WHO and FAO. “These two agencies defined the criteria but never listed the pesticides. The interesting and important part of [PAN’s report] is precisely that it names these highly hazardous pesticides,” he says.

[Read the full statements from BASF, Bayer, Syngenta and CropLife.](#)

*This report is part of *Por trás do alimento (Behind the food)*, a joint project of Agência Pública and Repórter Brasil to investigate the use of pesticides in Brazil, and was first published [here](#) in Portuguese on June 18, 2020. Read the full coverage on the [project website](#).*

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