

Slow Death, Fast Profits: Pesticides and Chemical Conflicts in Europe

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A report released last year by the watchdog body Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO) revealed huge conflicts of interests in the Scientific Committees under DG SANCO, the European Commission's department in charge of consumer issues (see [here](#) 'Chemical Conflicts').

These Committees assess the risk to humans and the environment of chemicals found in a huge range of everyday items, from shampoo to baby bottles. Their opinions guide European Commission regulators, who decide which chemicals are safe and at what levels and which should be banned.

The research found that two thirds of scientists had at least one, and some many more, conflicts of interest due to their links to industries impacted by assessments. The research focused on assessment procedures involving the Scientific Committees with regard to four substances, including endocrine disrupting parabens and DNA-damaging titanium dioxide – in nano-form. All of the substances are already widely available on the market.

Having gone through the annual declarations of the interests of all 57 members involved in the Scientific Committees' opinions on the four substances examined (parabens, nano titanium-dioxide, nano silver, and mercury dental amalgams), 67 percent of the scientists were found to have links with industries with a direct or indirect interest in the assessed chemicals. The research exposed links to pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline, chemical behemoth DuPont and consumer goods heavyweight Unilever.

CEO found that the most common conflict was working in a consultative or advisory role for industry. This means direct payment to the expert – or in some cases their research institution – for services to those companies whose products were regulated following the Scientific Committee opinions.

The implications of these types of conflicts of interests (and corporate lobbying) are laid bare by Arthur Nelson. Writing in the British newspaper The Guardian (2nd February 2015), he notes that as many as 31 pesticides with a value running into billions of pounds could have been banned in the EU because of potential health risks, if a blocked EU paper on hormone-mimicking chemicals had been acted upon (read Nelson's piece [here](#)).

The science paper that has been seen by The Guardian recommends ways of identifying and categorising the endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs) that scientists link to a rise in foetal abnormalities, genital mutations, infertility and adverse health effects ranging from cancer

to IQ loss.

Nelson writes that Commission sources say that the paper was buried by top EU officials under pressure from big chemical firms which use EDCs in toiletries, plastics and cosmetics, despite an annual health cost that studies peg at hundreds of millions of euros.

The paper's proposed criteria for categorisations of EDCs was supposed to have enabled EU bans of hazardous substances to take place last year. According to The Guardian, Commission officials say that under pressure from major chemical industry players (acting via SANCO), such as Bayer and BASF, the criteria were blocked. In their place, less stringent options emerged, along with a plan for an impact assessment that is not expected to be finalised until 2016.

Angeliki Lyssimachou, an environmental toxicologist for Pesticides Action Network Europe (PAN), is quoted by Nelson as saying:

"If the draft 'cut-off' criteria proposed by the commission had been applied correctly, 31 pesticides would have been banned by now, fulfilling the mandate of the pesticide regulation to protect humans and the environment from low-level chronic endocrine disrupting pesticide exposure."

The fear is that, as a result of industry pressure, any legislation or regulations will be watered down. A PAN study estimates that under the roadmap options currently being considered, no more than seven - and as few as zero - pesticides would ever be withdrawn.

According to The Guardian, Lisette van Vliet, a senior policy adviser to the Health and Environment Alliance, blamed pressure from the UK and German ministries and industry for delaying public protection from chronic diseases and environmental damage:

"This is really about whether we in the EU honestly and openly use the best science for identifying EDCs, or whether the interests of certain industries and two ministries or agencies from two countries manage to sway the outcome to the detriment of protecting public health and the environment."

Ordinary Europeans want officials to uphold the public interest and be independent from commercial influence. They do not want them to serve and profit from commercial interests at cost to the public's health and safety. However, what they too often get is massive conflicts of interest throughout the EU (see [here](#) the 'revolving door' and [here](#) 'the EFSA's independence problem') and a European Commission that is beholden to massive corporate lobbying [see [here](#) 'the fire power of the financial lobby' and [here](#) 'who lobbies most').

Regulators turn a blind eye to the deleterious effects of products that pose a serious systemic risk to the public [see [here](#) 'the glyphosate toxicity studies you're not allowed to see' and [here](#) 'case closed by EFSA on Roundup, despite new evidence'] and also give the nod to products based not on independent research but a company's statements or secretive studies taken at face value and then deliberately keep the public in the dark [see [here](#) 'Roundup and birth defects').

Unfortunately, what Europeans have is a European Commission that serves a corporate agenda (see [here](#) 'the black book on the corporate agenda of the EC').

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