

They Profit, We Die: Toxic Agriculture and the Poisoning of Soils, Human Health and the Environment

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Global Research, October 25, 2017

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Environment](#)

This article was originally published by GR on October 23, 2015.

Our food system is in big trouble. It's in big trouble because the global agritech/agribusiness sector is poisoning it, us and the environment with its pesticides, herbicides, GMOs and various other chemical inputs. The Rockefeller clan [exported the petrochemical intensive 'green revolution'](#) around the world with the aim of ripping up indigenous agriculture to cement its hegemony over global agriculture and to help the US create food deficit regions and thus use agriculture as a tool of foreign policy.

This was only made possible and continues to be made possible because of lavish funds, slick PR, compliant politicians and scientists and the undermining and capture of regulatory and policy decision-making bodies that supposedly serve the public interest.

For example, writing in the British newspaper The Guardian earlier this year, [Arthur Nelson](#) noted 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.

The science paper that was 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, pesticides, 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.”

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.”

A [new study](#) by Sebastian Stehle and Ralph Schultz of the University of Koblenz-Landau explains that prior to authorisation, a highly elaborate environmental risk assessment is mandatory according to EU pesticide legislation. However, no field data-based evaluation of the regulatory acceptable concentrations (RACs), and therefore of the overall protectiveness of EU pesticide regulations exists.

Based on a comprehensive meta-analysis using peer-reviewed literature on agricultural insecticide concentrations in EU surface waters and evaluated associated risks using the RACs derived from official European pesticide registration documents, the review found that 44.7 % of the 1,566 cases of measured insecticide concentrations (MICs) in EU surface waters exceeded their respective RACs.

The meta-analysis challenges the efficacy of the regulatory environmental risk assessment conducted for pesticide authorisation in the EU and indicates that critical revisions of related pesticide regulations and effective mitigation measures are urgently needed to substantially reduce the environmental risks arising from agricultural insecticide use.

The situation in the US is possibly even worse, Christina Sarich recently reported that 34,000 pesticides are currently registered for use in the US by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Industrial agriculture (75% of all land used in the US to grow food or raise animals) relies on these chemicals to grow food.

Sarich states that drinking water is [often contaminated by pesticides](#), and more babies are being born with [preventable birth defects](#) due to pesticide exposure. Chemicals are so prevalently used, they show up in breast milk of mothers. Illnesses are on the rise too, including asthma, autism and learning disabilities, birth defects and reproductive dysfunction, diabetes, Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s diseases and several types of cancer. Sarich says that their [connection to pesticide exposure](#) becomes more evident with every new study conducted.

Moreover, pollinating insects have been decimated by chemical herbicides and pesticides, which are also [stripping the soil of nutrients](#). As a result, for example, there has been a 41.1 to 100% [decrease in vitamin A in 6 foods](#): apple, banana, broccoli, onion, potato and tomato. Both onion and potato saw a 100% loss of vitamin A between 1951 and 1999.

And elected politicians and ‘public servants’ are allowing this to happen. In 2014, the authors of the report [‘The record of a Captive Commission’](#) (by Corporate Europe Observatory) concluded that the outgoing Barroso II European Commission’s trade and

investment policy revealed a bunch of unelected technocrats who cared little about what ordinary people want and negotiate on behalf of big business. For agriculture, the Commission had a one-sided relationship with agribusiness on GMOs and pesticides. Far from shifting Europe to a more sustainable food and agriculture system, the opposite had happened, as agribusiness and its lobbyists continued to dominate the Brussels scene.

The report continued by saying that Consumers in Europe reject GM food, but the Commission had made various attempts to meet the demands from the biotech sector to allow GMOs into Europe, aided by giant food companies, such as Unilever, and the lobby group FoodDrinkEurope. The authors noted links between these concerns and the top echelons of the Commission.

Aggressive lobbying by BASF had led to authorisation for GM Amfora potato commercial cultivation. According to the report, conflicts of interest in favour of the biotech industry within the European Food and Safety Agency (EFSA) had led to disputed and heavily criticised scientific advice being offered on the matter. The report noted that the industry had also been exerting strong pressure to prevent action by the EU on endocrine disruptors and pesticides.

These problems are not confined to Europe and the US; they are global. [Spiralling cancer rates](#) in Argentina linked to the use of glyphosate spring to mind. In Punjab, India, pesticides have turned the state into a '[cancer epicentre](#)'. Moreover, [Indian soils are being depleted](#) as a result of the application of 'green revolution' ideology and chemical inputs. India is losing 5,334 million tonnes of soil every year due to soil erosion because of the indiscreet and excessive use of fertilisers, insecticides and pesticides. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research reports that soil is become deficient in nutrients and fertility. As smallholders the world over are being [driven from their land](#) and the chemical-industrial farming model takes over, the problems continue to mount.

The environment, the quality of our food and our health are being sacrificed on the altar of corporate profit. The solution involves a shift to organic farming and investment in and reaffirmation of indigenous models of agriculture as advocated by the [International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge Science and Technology](#) (IAASTD) report.

Ordinary people 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 are massive conflicts of interest (see [here](#) the 'revolving door' and [here](#) 'the EFSA's independence problem') and governing bodies that are 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').

What people get are public institutions that serve a corporate agenda (see [here](#) 'the black book on the corporate agenda of the EC' and [here](#) about the conflicts of interest that beset decision making and regulatory bodies in India concerning GMOs) and which appear to be

setting the stage for the further extension of ‘green revolution’ ideology via the acceptance of corporate-patented GMOs, which spell disaster for soil, environment and health.

As Western junk food and the chemical-intensive agriculture and food processing model that accompanies it destroys health across the planet (see the impact of NAFTA in Mexico [here](#)), it is worth bearing in mind what [Stuart Newton says](#) (in the report in the link, read from page 9 onwards). Although discussing India, his concerns apply as much to the US, Europe and elsewhere as they do to the subcontinent:

“The answers to Indian agricultural productivity is not that of embracing the international, monopolistic, corporate-conglomerate promotion of chemically-dependent GM crops... India has to restore and nurture her depleted, abused soils and not harm them any further, with dubious chemical overload, which are endangering human and animal health.” (p24).

Newton provides a wealth of referenced data and detailed insight into the importance of soils and their mineral compositions and links their depletion to the ‘green revolution’. In turn, these depleted soils cannot help but lead to mass malnourishment. This in itself is quite revealing given that proponents of the green revolution claim it helped reduced malnutrition. Newton advocates a well-thought out approach to agriculture based on agroecology, a sound understanding of soil and the eradication of poisonous chemical inputs.

Such an approach is required globally if we are to move towards a nutritional, healthy food system that respects soil balance, environmental integrity and ultimately people. Failure to do so will result in the continued destruction of soils, environment, food and human health. And failure to expose and challenge the corruption, lobbying, back-room ‘free trade’ deals and revolving door that exists between agribusiness and decision-making/regulatory bodies will result in these corporations continuing to prosper at everyone else’s expense.

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