

## “Transgenic Corruption” and GM Crops in Argentina

The agency that approves GM crops in Argentina is stuffed with employees of GMO-producing agroindustrial companies and scientists with conflicts of interest

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*GM crops in Argentina are approved by people from the same companies that produce and market them, a new [investigation](#) by the journalist **Dario Aranda** reveals.*

The agency in which these people are collected is called the **National Advisory Committee on Agricultural Biotechnology (Conabia)**. According to Aranda, it is composed of representatives of Monsanto, Bayer, Syngenta, Indear/Bioceres, Pioneer/DuPont, Don Mario, ASA (Seed Companies' Association), Aapresid (Association of No-Till Producers - farmers who grow GM crops and use herbicide applications to control weeds), Argenbio and INTA (National Institute of Agricultural Technology). Out of 34 members, 26 belong to the same companies that produce seeds or are scientists with conflicts of interest.

Aranda writes that Conabia is a select and secretive group that decides which seeds are approved yet avoids responsibility for the resulting impacts: massive use of agrochemicals, land clearance, evictions, and health conditions. They are presented as “scientists”, “technicians” or “experts”, and hide their links with the companies that produce transgenics.

This corrupt system is having a devastating impact on the environment and the [health](#) of rural populations - just to supply [GMO animal feed](#) to factory farms in Europe.

### Secrets

Conabia was created on October 24, 1991, when the government of **Carlos Menem** made the decision to introduce GM crops in Argentina. It defined its profile as “scientific-technical”. Its composition was kept secret until 2014, when the information was leaked to MU, the magazine of the cooperative organization [Lavaca](#). Of 47 members, more than half (27) were employed by GMO seed companies and had conflicts of interest.

An example was **Martin Lema**, the head of Conabia and current director of Biotechnology in the Ministry of Agriculture, who published scientific papers with the very same companies that Conabia was supposed to be regulating: Monsanto, Syngenta, Bayer, BASF and Dow Agroscience.

This news was not taken up by any of the hundreds of agricultural journalists, who recycle information from those same companies and often repeat the slogan “GM crops are safe”.

## **Intacta**

Those within Conabia felt exposed for the first time: they refused to give interviews, nor did they attempt any explanation. The revelations impacted a legal case brought by the NGO Naturaleza de Derechos (Natural Rights) over the approval of Monsanto's Intacta GM soybeans. The lawyer **Fernando Cabaleiro** was able to show that Conabia worked for two decades without internal regulations and without the participation of citizens, who had objected to the whole procedure.

Last year the Commission celebrated its 25th anniversary. As part of the festivities, they announced "the approval of two biotechnological events", according to a notice put out by the Ministry of Agroindustry on November 2, 2016.

The Secretary for Added Value [sic. – El secretario de Agregado de Valor], **Néstor Roulet**, stressed "the contribution of Conabia to the technological development of agricultural activity". The celebration was held at the Buenos Aires Cereals Exchange. There they approved new soybean and corn seeds tolerant to the herbicides 2,4-D, glyphosate and glufosinate ammonium. The beneficiary was the US company Dow AgroScience.

### **"No recording"**

**Martín Lema**, director of Biotechnology in the Ministry of Agroindustry, and head of the Conabia, has three points in common with the Minister of Science, **Lino Barañao**: they are strong proponents of the GMO model; they have links with, and work with, companies in the sector; and both moved from positions in the government of **President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner** to that of her successor, **Mauricio Macri**.

Lema does not talk to the press. MU attempted to interview him repeatedly, but only once did he propose a meeting, specifying that there must be no recording or note-taking. "I want to clarify some things", he said. MU insisted that it would only agree to meet for the purposes of an interview. The meeting was never held.

Lema did speak with the rural supplement Clarín on November 4, 2016. The article was titled: "Argentina is a world benchmark in agricultural biotechnology". Lema stressed that Conabia

"guarantees the safety for the environment and for people of all products used in the Argentine countryside".

He said that the criticisms of GM crops originate from "those who spread disinformation because they serve various interests and have a political agenda".

Lema welcomed the fact that Argentina is the third biggest grower of GMOs after the United States and Brazil.

"This week two more soybean events were approved. Close to 40 have been authorized in the country, a third of them under my mandate," he said. And he described the future: GMO "trees that produce better wood, improved flowers, more nutritious rice and plants resistant to drought".



Conabia Conference (Source: [INTA](#))

## The winners

Through a former member of Conabia, MU was able to access an updated list of the current members. To the old squad have been added other officials with conflicts of interests:

- \* **Natalia Ceballos Ríos**. General Coordinator of the Biotechnology Group or “Bio Group”, which includes and is financed by seed companies, cereal firms and agrochemical companies such as Monsanto, Bayer, Syngenta, Dow, and Pioneer/DuPont, among others.
- \* **Alejandro Tozzini**, former manager of Monsanto, currently of Syngenta.
- \* **Gustavo Abratti**, head of “regulatory” affairs for DuPont-Pioneer.
- \* **Miguel Rapela** and **Fabiana Malacarne** (Asociación de Semilleros de Argentina/Association of Seed Companies of Argentina, which brings together all the multinational companies that market GM seeds).
- \* **Gabriela Levitus** of Argenbio, a scientific and political lobbying organization founded by Syngenta, Monsanto, Bayer, BASF, Bioceres, Dow, Nidera and Pioneer.
- \* **Claudio Gabriel Robredo**, Monsanto’s “director of regulatory affairs” between 2000 and 2011. He currently owns his own company, AgroReg, where he provides “advisory and management services in the crop and seeds regulatory area”. AgroReg is a member of ASA (Asociación de Semilleros Argentinos/Association of Seed Companies of Argentina).
- \* **Silvia Lede**, from the multinational BASF.
- \* **Mariano Devoto**, agricultural engineer and professor of botany at the Faculty of Agronomy of the University of Buenos Aires (UBA). He works within the framework of an agreement with Syngenta in the research project, “Pollination of soybeans: a study at different scales”.
- \* **Jorge Zavala**, agricultural engineer and professor of biochemistry. He works alongside **Eduardo Pagano**, the former vice-dean and one of the representatives of agribusiness in the Faculty of Agronomy at the UBA. Zavala is also deputy director of the Institute of Research in Agricultural and Environmental Biosciences (INBA, of Fauba), where he and Pagano work in collaboration with GMO companies.
- \* **Santiago D’Alessio**, director of wildlife at the Undersecretariat of Planning and Environmental Policy of the Nation.
- \* **Abelardo Portugal**. Agronomist, former president and representative of Aianba (Association of Agronomic Engineers of Buenos Aires North) and part of the organization Maizar, in which all the companies in the sector participate. Aianba is sponsored by Bayer, Dow and Monsanto, among other companies.
- \* **Mauro Meier**, of the Argentine Cooperatives Association (la Asociación de Cooperativas Argentinas), which defines itself as “one of the main grain operators in the country in the commercialization of cereals and oilseeds”. It’s part of the GMO industry.
- \* **Elba María Pagano** is another INTA representative, responsible for the promotion of transgenics. Linked to Red Bio Argentina (Biotechnology Network of Argentina), a forum where scientific-technical agribusiness drivers converge.
- \* **Mariano Podworny**, of the Coordination of Special Projects of Biotechnology at the National Institute of Seeds (Inase).

## Old acquaintances

The following people continue to occupy their seats in Conabia:

- \* **Dalia Marcela Lewi** (INTA). Part of the Institute of Genetics of INTA. Author of the book Biotechnology and Plant Breeding II, with co-author Clara Rubinstein of Monsanto Argentina. He also investigated the resistance of transgenic maize to cold and salinity together with the agribusiness company Bioceres and was a member of ILSI's Biotechnology Committee, along with researchers from Monsanto, Syngenta, Bayer and Dow Agrosiences.
- \* **Miguel Alvarez Arancedo**, director of regulatory affairs at Monsanto.
- \* **Magdalena Sosa Beláustegui**, manager of regulatory affairs and seeds for Bayer Cono Sur.
- \* **Mirta Antongiovanni**, regulatory affairs manager for the seed company Don Mario.
- \* **Gerónimo Watson**, technology director of Bioceres/Indear, where **Gustavo Grobocopatel** (chairman of Grupo Los Grobo, one of the largest agribusiness companies in Argentina) is a [Board Member](#). **Víctor Trucco** (honorary president of Aapresid) is director and the chief executive officer at [Bioceres](#).
- \* **Fernando Bravo Almonacid** (Conicet) is an independent researcher at the Conicet Institute of Research in Genetic Engineering and Molecular Biology (Ingebi-UBA) and works on the genetic improvement of the potato. After six years of work, in 2013 he developed a new variety which is intended to be more resistant to viruses. In 2015 he obtained the approval of Conabia – of which he is himself a member – for a potato resistant to a virus. The company in charge of the transgenic potato is Tecnoplant, part of the Sidus Group.
- \* **Monica Liliana Pequeño Araujo** and **Ana Vicario** (for Inase).
- \* **Silvia Passalacqua** and **Leonardo Gorodsky** (Senasa, the Argentine National Food Safety and Quality Service).
- \* **Gustavo Schrauf**, from the Faculty of Agronomy at the UBA.
- \* **Sara Maldonado** (Faculty of Exact and Natural Sciences at the UBA).
- \* **Hugo Permingeat**, of the Faculty of Agrarian Sciences of Rosario. As secretary general of the Faculty and along with the dean (**Liliana Ramirez**), he openly justified the private presence in the public university: “Monsanto trains its employees here. They are agronomists who provide them with postgraduate training and Monsanto values the training we offer.” This was the way he justified the fact that Monsanto, Pioneer and Syngenta had “donated” a laboratory of biotechnology to the Faculty, along with equipment worth USD 300,000.
- \* **Lucas Lieber**, of the Faculty of Agrarian Sciences of the University of Rosario. His CV details his work at the Indear/Bioceres company.
- \* **Andrés Venturino**, from the Center for Research in Environmental Toxicology and Agrobiotechnology at the University of Comahue.
- \* **Atilio Castagnaro** is an expert at the Estación Experimental Agro industrial Obispo Colombres (EEAOC). In 2011 he was part of a team of Mercosur scientists who created a robot that looks for those soybean plants that best withstand drought. Two companies participated in the working group (and patenting): Nidera (one of the big agromultinationals) and Indear/Bioceres (Rosario Agrobiotechnology Institute).
- \* **Alejandro Petek**, of the business organization Aapresid (Association of No-Till Producers), a lobbying forum that promotes the GMO model of agriculture. He now has a position in the Ministry of Agroindustry.
- \* **Luis Negruchi**, also from Aapresid.

### **No critical voice**

In 2017 Conabia, which according to its official announcements supports “transparency”, has 34 members for the approval of GMO seeds. A large majority of them – 26 – belong to companies that produce GM crops or are scientists/entrepreneurs with conflicts of interest.

That is: they sit on both sides of the counter, both as a regulator and as a part of the industry that directly benefits from a favourable opinion on the GM crop.

The body responsible for releasing seeds of soybeans, maize, cotton, potatoes and sugar cane and for the growing crops has no scientist critical of the development of GMOs. It also has no representatives of civil society.

In private hearings and without public records, 34 people decide that the future of 24 million hectares will be to grow GM crops that involve the massive use of pesticides.

They also conceal the approval dossiers for these GM crops.

If a university, research institute, social organization or journalist wants to access the approval dossiers for soybeans, maize, cotton or transgenic potatoes, they cannot: they are "confidential".

The results are well known: since 1996, 41 GM soybean, maize, cotton and potato "events" have been approved in Argentina. The beneficiaries were Syngenta, Monsanto, Bayer, Indear, Dow, Tecnoplant and Pioneer and Nidera, among others - the very same companies that dominate Conabia.

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