11-22-2013

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Questions Raised Throughout South America Regarding Use and Abuse of Agrochemicals

by Andrés Gaudín

Category/Department: Region
Published: 2013-11-22

What began as a straight-forward journalistic investigation into modern farming practices in Argentina has turned into something of a regional rallying cry for critics of the US-based firm Monsanto and other large multinational agricultural firms involved in the production of genetically modified (transgenic) seeds and potent agrochemicals, which tend to be used hand in hand with those seeds.

The article in question—written and researched by Associated Press (AP) reporters Michael Warren and Natacha Pisarenko—was published on Oct. 20 with a dateline from Basavilbaso, in the eastern Argentine province of Entre Ríos. There, transgenic soybean plantations have replaced the traditional farms started by Jewish and Italian immigrants who founded the city in the late 1800s. The article’s appearance coincides with a growing movement in South America against Monsanto, a US company based in St. Louis, Missouri. Critics worry about the adverse effects Monsanto products such as Roundup—a powerful and widely used herbicide made with the chemical glyphosate—could be having on humans, animals, plant life, water supplies, and the environment in general.

Monsanto made use of a follow up article—published two days after the scathing report went public—to respond to the AP’s claims. The company criticized the Warren and Pisarenko piece as being "overbroad" and insisted that "glyphosate is safe." Monsanto also urged Argentina to better control how the company’s products are used. "If pesticides are being misused in Argentina, then it is in everyone’s best interests—the public, the government, farmers, industry, and Monsanto—that the misuse be stopped," the company insisted.

A large testing ground

Monsanto has attracted criticism throughout Latin America, including in Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Panama. But it has come under particular fire in Argentina, where it decided to build a transgenic seed plant in the central province of Córdoba. Monsanto’s special relationship with the country dates back to the mid-1990s (NotiSur, Feb. 27, 2004). Through a deal signed in 1996, the multinational was able to turn Argentina into a vast laboratory in which farmers—too excited about the generous harvests that resulted to worry about potential long term problems—began planting more and more genetically modified seeds and using copious amounts of defoliating herbicides, namely Roundup.

Despite warnings from experts all over the world, the governments of what the multinational company Syngenta calls the "United Republic of Soy" (Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay) have not studied the already detected effects of these new agricultural practices. Not only that, but in Argentina, for example, the state-run Instituto Nacional de Tecnología Agropecuaria (INTA) openly promotes the use of both glyphosate and transgenic seeds.

The construction of Monsanto’s Córdoba factory, slated for the city of Malvinas Argentinas, came to a halt in mid-October when hundreds of residents descended on the site and blocked trucks
from delivering materials. The Fundación para la Defensa del Medio Ambiente (FUNAM), in the meantime, has filed legal complaints against two provincial government officials who "approved and authorized construction of the largest corn-seed factory in the world without taking the minimum precautions and without having the [corresponding] environmental-impact studies," according to agronomy expert Raúl Montenegro, the organization’s president.

Once completed, the facility will have 240 storage silos with enough genetically modified seeds in them to plant 3.5 million hectares of crops. Researcher Medardo Ávila Vázquez, head of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Médicos de Pueblos Fumigados, said one of the risks of this endeavor is a health condition known as farmer’s lung, a potentially chronic inflammation that humans can develop after inhaling dust particles derived from agricultural products. "Nowhere else in the world are there so many silos together like this. And all that grain will be covered in a film of the most toxic agrochemicals," he said.

** Continentwide complaints**

Concerns about glyphosate are by no means restricted to Argentina. In late September, in the Colombian capital of Bogotá, participants in a three-day national forum regarding the problem of illicit drugs demanded an end to aerial glyphosate spraying, a practice used in Colombia to eradicate coca production (NotiSur, Aug. 26, 2005). The forum was backed by both the UN and the Universidad Nacional de Colombia (UNAL) as a way to contribute ideas for ongoing peace talks (taking place in Cuba) between the Colombian government and guerilla groups. Participants also demanded indemnities for people affected by the fumigations. Campesino and indigenous delegates from coca-growing zones complained that aerial spraying causes "serious health problems among the people, pollutes our water supplies, and destroys the flora and fauna in rich tropical forest zones."

Glyphosate spraying has already landed Colombia in hot water with Ecuador, which took the issue to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague (NotiSur, Aug. 17, 2007). The Colombian government recently agreed to stop aerial glyphosate spraying in border areas and compensate its southern neighbor to the tune of US$15 million (NotiSur, Oct. 11, 2013).

Residents in Uruguay are sounding the alarm as well. On Oct. 13, townspeople from Guichón, in the western department of Paysandú, reported that spraying caused children from five different schools to develop skin and eye problems. Agrochemicals may also be affecting local bee populations. Uruguay’s Ministerio de Ganadería y Agricultura has confirmed the collapse of bee colonies in various farming areas.

In Paraguay, campesinos and indigenous residents along the Brazilian border have been complaining for years about fumigations. Frustrations have led in some instances to armed confrontations with illegal private police employed by transgenic-soy producers. More recently, on Oct. 22, Paraguayan residents reported that a man in the northern town of Canindeyú died from chemical exposure. Another 20 people were sickened in nearby Curuguaty, where glyphosate spraying is also common.

And in Panama, approximately 2,000 campesinos living in the banana-growing region of Barú, on land operated by the US fruit company Chiquita Brands, have complained about various health problems presumably related to agrochemical spraying. "We have workers who are sterile, who
have open sores, who have lost their sight, who have all kinds of different allergic reactions," said Melida Cubilla, spokesperson for the Asociación de Personas Afectadas por Agroquímicos.

**Weighing the evidence**

The attention-grabbing AP article focuses on Argentina and describes dramatic cases of people affected by glyphosate. "Doctors are warning that uncontrolled pesticide use could be the cause of growing health problems among the 12 million people who live in the South American nation’s vast farm belt," the story reads. The writers reference a Universidad Nacional de Rosario (UNR) study—involving 65,000 people—that found cancer rates in Santa Fe province, the heart of Argentina’s soy industry, to be "two times to four times higher than the national average, as well as thyroid disorders, respiratory illnesses, and other afflictions seldom seen before."

"There is a change in the pattern of illnesses: respiratory problems are more frequent, as is chronic dermatitis; epileptic patients have more intense convulsions during fumigations periods; there are more cases of depression and immunity disorders; there has been a higher incidence of miscarriage and more people seeking consultation regarding male and female infertility," the UNR researchers concluded.

The AP article also mentioned a study done using archives from all of the public hospitals in the northern province of Chaco. The study found that congenital defects among newborns more than quadrupled over the past 17 years, up from 19.1 per 10,000 births in 1996, the year transgenic seeds were introduced into Argentina, to 85.3 per 10,000 now. Another medical team carried out a study involving 3,051 people in six different Chaco communities and found that people in towns where spraying occurs suffer on average more illnesses than do people in towns were fumigations do not take place.

Monsanto’s Buenos Aires spokesperson, Pablo Vaquero, insists Roundup is safe—when used properly. "Glyphosate is even less toxic than the repellent you put on your children’s skin," he told the AP.

Governments have shown little interest in investigating the matter, making it all the more challenging for researchers to counter Monsanto’s claims. Given the multitude of chemicals people are in contact with every day, it is extremely difficult for scientists to establish that a specific product could be causing cancer or birth defects. That should not, however, stop governments from taking action, according to US scientist Doug Gurian-Sherman, a former Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulator now with the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS). "If you have the weight of evidence pointing to serious health problems, you don't wait until there's absolute proof in order to do something," he told the AP.

In the meantime, the transgenic industry continues to gain ground in Latin America. This past year it managed to get the four Southern Cone countries—Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay—to authorize the introduction of yet another genetically modified seed, Maize 1507, which will require even more glyphosate fumigations.

During germination, the seed—still under consideration by the European Union (EU)—produces the toxin Bt2. A Canadian study showed that these toxins appear in the fetal umbilical cords and in the blood of pregnant women and is thus a real cause for concern. Monsanto downplayed the findings, saying that Bt toxins are "inoffensive and break down in the digestive tract." Lead scientist Marcia
Ishii-Eiteman of the Pesticide Action Network North America (PANNA) is not so sure. "There is no way to know what effect these toxins will have on developing fetuses," she said.

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