UN pushing GE crops in Mexico; Syngenta sued over atrazine; Monsanto admits failure on Bt cotton

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Pesticide Action Network Updates Service (PANUPS)

A Weekly News Update on Pesticides, Health and Alternatives
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March 11, 2010

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UN pushing GE crops in Mexico; farmers push back

Peasant, family farm, and indigenous peoples' organizations are pushing back against the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) conference on Agricultural Biotechnologies in Developing Countries in Guadalajara, Mexico. Last week's invitation-only conference was hosted by the Mexican government and co-sponsored by the International Fund for Agricultural Development. At a plenary session on "Targeting biotechnologies to the poor," Filipino farmer Isidoro Ancog pointed out that the risks and additional costs associated with the genetic engineering (GE) technologies the FAO is so keen on delivering to farmers in developing countries are too often obscured by jargon-laden packaging. Ancog also pointed out the lack of representation of poor people at the conference, asking "Why am I a target [of] technologies that are designed without my knowledge? That I do not really need? ... How many more farmers in India and elsewhere would be mired in debt and how many more will commit suicide because of GMOs? Do we have to make the same mistakes and end up with the same problems?"

Meanwhile the "First public hearing to prepare the presentation of the GM Maize case before international courts ," organized by La Via Campesina North America, Red en Defensa del Maíz (Network in Defense of Maize, Mexico), and Asamblea Nacional de Afectados Ambientales (Assembly of People Displaced by Environmental Impacts, Mexico), was also held in Guadalajara. The hearing organizers declared the FAO conference an "act of aggression" because of its pro-GMO agenda, particularly in a place where, as Eutimio Díaz, of the Wixarika people in Jalisco, put it, "for indigenous people, maize is first, maize is ours, and we are part of her." The conference comes just as Mexico readies itself to begin trials of experimental GM corn varieties, a project that threaten to irreversibly contaminate the wealth of biodiversity that exists in the plant's place of origin.

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EPA petitioned, Syngenta sued over atrazine

Atrazine is getting the national attention it deserves. On Monday of this week, a coalition of 16 Midwestern cities in six states filed a lawsuit to force atrazine manufacturer Syngenta to pay for clean-up costs to filter the chemical out of municipal water supplies, reports the *Huffington Post* . Stephen Tillery, the lawyer representing the communities in the suit, said that the cities have spent upwards of $350 million in local taxpayer money filtering atrazine out their drinking water, while Syngenta's profits from atrazine sales are in the billions. Syngenta's spokespersons claim there is no need to filter the chemical, despite the fact that in 2008 EPA found atrazine in water from at least two of the cities (Coulterville, IL and Monroeville, OH) at levels of 30 parts per billion (ppb) - well above the 3 ppb level deemed "safe" by the federal government.

Earlier this week, Pesticide Action Network delivered a petition with thousands of member signatures to EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson, urging her to make the current review of atrazine a "model of scientific integrity," and to take swift action to protect farmers, rural communities and the general public if the herbicide poses a threat to human health and the environment. A weed-killer sprayed primarily on cornfields, atrazine was initially approved by EPA in 2003, after Syngenta held over 50 private, closed door meetings with regulators. The current review coincides with release of new studies linking atrazine to potential health problems. The most recent was research published last week by the National Academy of Sciences that showed male frogs exposed to "safe" levels of atrazine became females able to mate and lay eggs. National media outlets from the *Washington Post* to FOX News and *Scientific American* covered the story.

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Monsanto admits failure on Bt cotton

The ongoing debate on genetically engineered (GE) crops in India took a new turn on Friday when U.S. seed and pesticide firm Monsanto disclosed that the pink bollworm, a major cotton pest, has developed resistance to its Bt cotton, according to *India Today* . Bt cotton is engineered to include the soil bacterium Bacillus thuringiensis, and is designed specifically to resist bollworms. It is the same technology used in Bt brinjal (eggplant), which was recently put on hold by the Indian government due to mass demonstrations opposing what would have been the first major GE food crop in the country. In the U.S. and in India, the agricultural biotechnology industry has pointed to Bt cotton as an example of successful GE crops. But the technology's shortcomings have been apparent to cotton farmers around the world for years prior to Monsanto admitting the pink bollworm's resistance.

In India, cotton productivity with the technology has fallen from 560 kg lint per hectare in 2007 to 512 kg in 2009, while pesticide expenditure has gone up from Rs 597 crore in 2002 to 791 crore in 2009. As Bt cotton is designed to be toxic only to bollworms, a host of new sucking pests have arisen, costing farmers more in lost crops and additional pesticide use. Monsanto claims that the resistance stems from early over-use of Bt cotton and from farmers not following instructions; they also promised that their next generation of Bt cotton (Bollgard II, which has an additional gene inserted) addresses the pink bollworm resistance problem. However, in a recent meeting between Monsanto representatives and 40 U.S. farmers, the farmers reported "there is no help for insect resistance management for bollworms that are 'slipping' through Bollgard II cotton and must be treated with pyrethroids that are becoming less effective with each application. We were supposed to have enough control of bollworms with BGII to not have to treat for bollworms."

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