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Monsanto's flagship pesticide linked to cancer and antibiotic resistance

PAN International calls for strong global response

The International Agency for Research and Cancer (IARC) of the World Health Organization (WHO) recently designated glyphosate as “probably carcinogenic to humans.”

The IARC concluded that there is sufficient evidence of carcinogenicity in experimental animals. The decision was made after 17 scientists met on March 20 to assess the carcinogenicity of the herbicide glyphosate and four organophosphate pesticides.

“Monsanto's weed-killer glyphosate is wreaking havoc with the health of children and rural communities in Argentina,” said Javier Souza, chair of Pesticide Action Network International. “Thousands of people suffer from glyphosate-related illnesses, and the cancer rates are two to four times higher than the national average.”

Souza is from Argentina, which plants an estimated 24 million hectares of crops — mostly soybeans — that are genetically engineered (GE) to resist glyphosate. In 2014, 79 million gallons of glyphosate were applied on soybeans and other crops in Argentina. Brazil plants even more than Argentina, with 40 million hectares of GE crops, again mostly soybeans. Uruguay, Paraguay, and Bolivia also grow millions of hectares of GE soy resistant to glyphosate.

Monsanto is the creator of both its brand-name herbicide RoundUp, containing the active ingredient glyphosate, and of GE soybean, corn, and cotton engineered to withstand applications of glyphosate. Glyphosate has become the most heavily used herbicide in the world, bringing billions of dollars in profits to the giant biotech corporation. In the United States, about 94% of the soybeans, 89% of the corn and 91% of the cotton planted are GE resistant to glyphosate.

“Glyphosate and other herbicides have also been linked to antibiotic resistance,” said Judy Hatcher, vice-chair of PAN International. “The combination of carcinogenicity and antibiotic resistance linked to Monsanto's flagship pesticide are two loud wake-up calls for the global community. As a matter of highest priority, policymakers should keep the next wave of genetically engineered seeds – containing glyphosate and other old, hazardous chemicals – off the market,” she added.

Researchers in New Zealand found that formulations of herbicides containing glyphosate, 2,4-D, and dicamba can lead to development of antibiotic resistance in disease-causing bacteria, such as E. coli and Salmonella.

“In Asia glyphosate is widely used and the link with carcinogenicity and antibiotic resistance is a matter of urgent concern for farmers and agricultural workers who are exposed,” said Sarojeni Rengam from PAN Asia Pacific.

“Experience in Africa and other parts of the world show that toxic agrochemicals affect the poorest of the poor, and this situation cannot go on as usual,” said Abou Thiam from PAN Africa.

“Hazardous pesticides are part of an obsolete technology and don’t belong in agriculture,” added Keith Tyrell from PAN UK. And Carina Weber from PAN Germany remarked: “This is an opportunity for policymakers to exercise their political will, and move the world forward towards sustainable, healthy agriculture, free from toxins.”

As a result of the new research, PAN International calls on governments and policymakers to take urgent measures to curtail and stop the use of herbicide formulations containing glyphosate applied to genetically engineered seeds and crops. The network also urges governments to develop action plans within the next 60 days to layout how they will address the concerns highlighted in recent studies.

Furthermore, PAN International urges governments to stop the release and marketing of highly hazardous pesticides, and establish policies to promote safer agricultural practices that protect workers, consumers and the environment, and provides a dignified living to farmers.

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Pesticide Action Network (PAN) is a network of over 600 participating nongovernmental organizations, institutions and individuals in over 90 countries working to replace the use of hazardous pesticides with ecologically sound and socially just alternatives.

Contact:

Javier Souza, Chair of PAN International & PAN Latin America: javierrapal@yahoo.com.ar, 0054 11 36171782

Paul Towers, PAN North America: ptowers@panna.org, cell: +1 916 216 1082

Sarojeni Rengam, PAN Asia Pacific: sarojeni.rengam@panap.net, +6 04 657 0271

Abou Thiam, PAN Africa: aboutthiam@pan-afrique.org, +221 338254914

Keith Tyrell, PAN UK: keithtyrell@pan-uk.org, +44 7588 706224

Susan Haffmans, PAN Germany: susan.haffmans@pan-germany.org, +49 40 3991910 25