Monsanto on hot seat; Miracle-Gro & baseball deal; Climate change & persistent pesticides

Pesticide Action Network Updates Service (PANUPS)

A Weekly News Update on Pesticides, Health and Alternatives
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March 19, 2010

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Monsanto on hot seat

Ankeny, Iowa – Last Friday marked the beginning of a year-long investigation into the ill-effects of corporate control over food and farming. In an unusual collaboration, the U.S. departments of justice (DOJ) and agriculture (USDA) have convened the investigations, promising what Assistant Attorney General Christine Varney termed an "unrelenting quest to find the correct balance" of power in agriculture, according to Reuters. The day was historic, if long overdue. In between two million farmers and 300 million consumers stand a handful of corporations controlling all the traffic. Friday's "workshop" focused on the seed industry in particular. Monsanto representatives were present in force, as the corporation is under scrutiny for near-monopoly control of corn and soybean seed markets, and genetically engineered seed markets more broadly.

On the ground in Iowa were Pesticide Action Network's Executive Director, Kathryn Gilje, and Senior Scientist, Dr. Marcia Ishii-Eteman. Gilje and Ishii-Eteman joined hundreds of farmers, food workers, Iowans and PAN allies -- including National Family Farm Coalition, Food & Water Watch, and Food Democracy Now! -- in a town hall meeting organized on Thursday evening to bring together and give voice to farmers, advocates and allies from across the political spectrum, all of whom share an interest in breaking up monopoly control over food and agriculture. The message from farmers was clear: "Enough is enough. Corporations have no right to control our food and our lives. It's time to bust up Big Ag!"

Dr. Ishii Eteman presented scientific evidence from the most comprehensive analysis of global agriculture (PDF) ever undertaken. The assessment found that: (1) Genetically modified seeds and industrial-scale farming will not feed our growing world; and (2) these technologies in fact have benefited large, transnational corporations and wealthier groups, not the hungry. On seeds, in particular, PAN is concerned about a very small handful of multinational corporations controlling our shared seedstock -- the very foundation of food and agriculture. Ever since a narrow 5-4 Supreme Court decision in 1980 to allow the patenting of living organisms, and a law adopted the same year that allows publicly funded research to be patented and sold for commercial use, seeds are increasingly owned by a small handful of corporations, with Monsanto, DuPont/Pioneer and Syngenta in the lead.

Baseball under fire to break deal with Scotts Miracle-Gro

Summers spent on Major League Baseball's (MLB's) "fields of dreams" just took a step back into the toxic solutions of yesterday. Declining to act as a role model, as the league so often asks of its players, MLB announced a new marketing partnership with Scotts Miracle-Gro. As some of the most ideal "lawns" in the country, professional baseball fields promote the classic summertime experience. Yet by co-branding with Scotts, MLB is signaling to fans that toxic chemicals are necessary ingredients for growing a beautiful green lawn. In a recent press release, the SafeLawns Foundation -- with Beyond Pesticides, Pesticide Action Network and 27 additional environmental and health organizations across the U.S. have demanded that Major League Baseball renounce its marketing partnership with Scotts Miracle-Gro.

"In this day and age, with environmental awareness at an all-time high and available resources at an all-time low, it is simply unacceptable to "re-ignite the competition for the best lawn in the neighborhood" — which is the stated goal of the MLB / Miracle-Gro partnership," said the SafeLawns Foundation. While homeowners across the country aim to protect the environment and their families' health by seeking alternatives to toxic practices of the past, MLB will promote these chemical solutions. PAN Managing Director Steve Scholl-Buckwald observes, "As players are lambasted for pumping up their bodies with steroids and other chemicals, it seems incongruous that MLB wouldn't apply these same standards to the fields they play on."
New Hampshire studying cosmetic pesticide ban

A few weeks ago, PANUPS reported that a legislative battle was heating up in the New Hampshire House of Representatives over a bill that would establish a legislative committee to “study the effects of a moratorium on the use of...pesticides and herbicides...in residential neighborhoods, school properties, playgrounds, and other places children congregate.” That battle has now ended, with common sense triumphing over the best efforts of lawn care industry lobbyists to defeat the bill. According to Paul Tukey from Safelawns.org, the bill’s sponsor, Suzanne Smith, “expects the Environment and Agriculture Committee to begin work by the third week in April.”

Climate change and persistent chemicals

The United Nations announced a major study last week that will focus on the relationship between highly toxic, persistent industrial chemicals and pesticides and climate change, and their effect on human health and the environment. The new 12-month study will be conducted by the Secretariat of the Stockholm Convention, focused on the class of chemicals known as persistent organic pollutants, or POP’s. The Convention, which has been signed by more than 90 countries (15 of which, including the U.S., have yet to ratify it), has already banned more than 20 substances identified as POP’s because they persist in the environment, bioaccumulate, and cause cancers, reproductive harm, immune and nervous system damage, and even death. The study’s leader, UN Environment Programme scientist Fatoumata Keita-Ouane, has pointed out that some data indicate that higher temperatures can increase sensitivity to the effects of certain chemicals in wildlife. The combination of higher emission levels due to climate change and the increased incidences of POP’s in air and water as a result of melting polar ice will exacerbate the detrimental effects of the toxic substances. Dr. Keita-Ouane said, “Exposures to POPs in combination with other factors, such as the expanding range of disease vectors and immune suppression, could also have a detrimental effect on certain organisms, the food web and biodiversity.” The study’s participants, which include more than 10 organizations in five countries, aim to provide the scientific community and policymakers with better tools to regulate and limit the effects of climate change on emissions, environmental distribution, toxicity and exposure.

Parkinson’s, pesticides and ‘cooperative toxicity’

Scientists continue to find that combinations of pesticides are more likely to damage the neurological system. A new study in NeuroToxicology reports that when combined, lindane and dieldrin were “more effective in causing toxicity” in neurons than when used alone. The University of Florida laboratory study looked specifically at dopaminergic (DA) neurons, degeneration of which results in Parkinson’s disease. Studies exploring the combined neurological effects of multiple pesticides are lacking, according to the researchers, though they more accurately reflect real world human exposures. “The results demonstrate that dieldrin and lindane work cooperatively to induce DA neurotoxicity,” report the scientists. Dieldrin and lindane are organochlorine pesticides that persist in the environment and bioaccumulate along the food chain. Dieldrin was banned from agricultural use in the U.S. in 1974 and for all uses by 1987, but can still be found in the environment and food supply. Agricultural uses of lindane were withdrawn in the U.S. in 2006; use of the pesticide is still allowed in lice shampoos and scabies lotions. Lindane was added to the list for global elimination under the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants in May 2009, with worldwide phaseout slated for 2014.