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Pesticide Action Week

No Pesticides, No GMOs



As pesticide action week is set to begin, one may reflect on the fact that GMOs have been sold primarily as a way of reducing the use of pesticides. Shouldn't we then celebrate this way to reduce our pesticide addiction and embrace a great new agricultural technology? The first point to consider is the fact that it is the pesticides companies that make and patent these GMO crops, and that alone should make us rather sceptical about the argument. Is it really logical for a company to try to sell less of its products? Furthermore, let's not forget that these companies have fiercely opposed all EU proposals to reduce the use of pesticides. With economic and pseudo-scientific arguments, they have gone as far as suing the Commission for its moratorium on some uses of certain neonicotinoids, and enrolling scientists to try and minimise the health and environmental impacts of those. This can only make us question their claims that GMOs are safe. Let's take a quick look at what we're dealing with after 20 years of growing GMO crops: There are only two main traits which have been engineered in crops: tolerance to herbicides and the production of insecticides. Herbicide tolerant (HT) plants represent around 80% of the GMOs that are grown on the planet. Their use is simple. As they have been genetically modified to withstand herbicide spraying, one just needs to spray them with herbicides to get rid of the weeds. When the field is sprayed, only the GMO crop survives and the weeds are killed. It is very difficult to believe that these crops will lead to a reduction in herbicide use when the result is exactly the opposite to what is intended - the use of

Round-up (the most popular herbicide globally, marketed by Monsanto) has skyrocketed in the US after Round-up Ready soy, corn or cotton has been widely used. Farmers have been led to spray systematically, largely thanks to these HT crops that do not die when sprayed. The result has been a tremendous increase in herbicide tolerant weeds, which in turn leads to increasing herbicide doses to fight these super weeds, as well as a return to older, more toxic herbicides, such as 2,4D. As the herbicide treadmill starts running, biotech and pesticides companies engineer new GMOs that are tolerant to these old toxic herbicides. This vicious cycle explains the deregulation of 2,4D tolerant soy and maize last year in the US, which will lead to a considerable increase in 2,4D use, as well as contamination of the environment and the food chain, with potential health consequences. The remaining (20% of) GMO crops are mainly insecticide producing crops, for the most part corn and cotton. Insecticide producing crops are considered real progress in terms of insecticide sprays, as the plants are supposed to produce the insecticide themselves and kill their pests. It is not, however, a panacea against the use of insecticides, as these GMO crops are generally protected against specific pests, and farmers still need to use other insecticides for other insect pests. Although it seemed that in the first years of use farmers actually sprayed less insecticide, certain phenomena which were relatively easy to anticipate are now appearing: target insects are becoming immune to the GMO toxin, as has been seen in the US with the corn root borer (diabrotica), dubbed the 1-billion dollar bug due to the considerable damage it can cause to maize producers. In other regions, a proliferation of secondary pests has also been observed, unleashed by the disappearance of the target pests. This forces farmers to increase their insecticide use after a few years of using insecticide GMOs. For HT plants, as well as for insecticide producing plants, companies now have only one remedy on offer when it comes to fighting resistance from pests. The proposed remedy is to stack genes, meaning engineering several insecticide genes and several herbicide tolerant genes in the same plant, with the hope that it will delay resistance in weeds or pests. Indeed, the new GMO crops on the market are stacked HT and insecticide plants, such as Smartstax and Powercore, which are included in the list of GMOs that the European Commission is set to approve in the next number of weeks. Do we want to grow and eat plants that contain up to six different insecticides and two herbicides, like the infamous Smartstax GMO maize? Does it mean any reduction in pesticide use? Clearly, 20 years of experimenting with GMOs shows us that GMOs and pesticides are closely linked., The fight for a pesticide free EU (and planet) must also be a fight against GMOs.

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