

COMMENT

EU ALLOWS EXPORT OF POISON TO THE SOUTH

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A RESEARCH report by Swiss-based NGO Public Eye and Unearthed, Greenpeace UK's investigation unit, (assisted by groundWork in South Africa) has revealed the extent to which the EU allows the export of banned toxic agro-pesticides to countries in the global south.

This research exposes the hypocrisy of allowing multinational agro-chemical companies to flood low- and middle-income countries with substances deemed too dangerous for European agriculture. The Swiss-based giant Syngenta plays a leading role.

Syngenta's best-selling pesticide, paraquat, is so dangerous that just one sip can be lethal.

Even small to medium amounts of paraquat can lead to fatal poisoning, with known incidents of lung scarring and of multiple organ failure. Paraquat has been banned in Switzerland since 1989 and in the EU since 2007, on the grounds that it is too hazardous for European farmers even when wearing protective equipment.

Despite this, Syngenta continues to manufacture 28000 tons in the EU and export it to countries with weaker regulations in South America, Asia and Africa, where it causes thousands of poisonings every year. Paraquat alone accounts for more than a third of Europe's exports of banned pesticides.

The researchers obtained thousands of "export notifications", the paperwork required under European law to export their banned pesticides beyond the EU to provide us with the most complete available record of this deadly trade. More than 81000 tons of banned pesticides were approved for export.

They are banned because of the unacceptable risks that they pose to human health and the environment. Three-quarters of the 85 importing countries are low- or middle-income countries, where the use of these substances presents the highest risks. Brazil, Ukraine, Morocco, Mexico and South Africa are among the top 10 importers of pesticides "banned in Europe".

South Africa accounts for 1700 tons of those banned pesticides.

Our "Rainbow Nation" stands out for the diversity of pesticides imported. Among these products – including cyanamide, paraquat, alachlor and nine other toxic substances – were banned in Europe because the health risks were considered too high for farmers, even with the necessary protective equipment. This practice of allowing exports of pesticides too dangerous for use for EU farmers is akin to "environmental racism" because workers and communities will end up being disproportionately exposed to toxic pesticides where regulations and conditions of use are not as rigorous as the EU.

When confronted about this practice, the corporations put forward arguments that their products are safe and they are committed to risk reduction.

They say that they respect the laws of the countries in which they operate, and that each country has the sovereign right to decide which pesticides best meet the needs of its farmers, even though the chemicals have been explicitly banned in the EU in order to protect human health or the environment.

Baskut Tuncak, the former UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and hazardous substances and waste, says: "If the EU, with all its resources, comes to the conclusion that these pesticides pose unacceptable risks and are too dangerous for use, then how could they be safely used in poorer countries when the necessary protections are typically unavailable? Most importing countries are also unable to control and monitor the use of such dangerous substances."

Ironically, among the banned pesticides residues most frequently detected in EU imported foods are substances banned for use in the EU. Michael Fakhri, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food sums up the double standard nicely ... "If a country bans the use of pesticides because they are deemed to be too dangerous, it should not allow its companies to export them, nor should it accept the import of food produced with these substances."

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