

European ban on pesticides opens door to alternative approaches

The European Parliament voted to ban 22 pesticides to protect the health of consumers and farmers. Besides pesticide companies, large-scale farmers in Europe are protesting against the ban because they fear their yields and incomes will fall. Others see it as an important stimulus to develop alternative pest management methods, building on thousands of years of farming experience.

Industry representatives and some farmers in Europe responded negatively to the decision of the European Parliament because they fear that the yields and quality of their major vegetable and fruit commodities will go down. However, according to Stephen Sherwood, an organic farmer who works for the NGO World Neighbors, and who has worked on these issues in Latin America for over 20 years, history does not back up this concern: "I have heard those same arguments for two decades. The agrochemical industry likes to promote the myth that their products are essential for food security. I know of no examples where removal of a (pesticide) product from the market led to production declines. In all cases, farmers adapted and found new alternatives, including non-chemical alternatives. We should remember that in most parts of the world, chemical-free farming outlives the industry's products by millennia." Sherwood considers the most dramatic example of this to be when the Indonesian government reduced subsidies on pesticides as well as banning 57 pesticides in 1986. According to research on the government's wider strategy of integrated pest management (IPM) conducted by Peter Kenmore (Deputy Director of the FAO's Plant Production and Protection Division), rice production actually increased by 12 percent within a few years of pesticide reduction.

European farmers also worry that they will not be able to compete with lower-priced imports from countries outside the EU, where farmers can still use the pesticides. This fear is negated on the EU website, however, as: "food imports are already checked by the EU for pesticide residue levels," which would now include the new pesticides as well.

Room for alternatives in the EU...

Those supporting the ban point to the opportunity that this new law will bring to the research community to develop



Photo: S. Jayaraj

Cotton farmers in India studying about insects as part of a course on IPM, an alternative approach to pest control promoted by the EU in its directive accompanying the ban.

safer alternatives. The EU actually promotes integrated pest management within a directive on the sustainable use of pesticides (that accompanies the proposed legislation), as a viable way of maintaining production and controlling pests through agroecological and cultural methods. However, some may find the EU ruling too soft as it gives pesticide manufacturers five years to adjust their products; also, if no alternative product exists in 2013, farmers may continue to use them for another five years.

...and abroad

"It's about time this ban takes place!" says Fábio Kessler Dal Soglio, from the department of Rural Studies at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil. Dal Soglio is not only a professor, but he also leads the development of a network working to eliminate pesticide use in Brazil, *Rede Brasileira contra os Agrotóxicos*. Composed of health, consumer, environmental and agroecological farmer groups, this network will officially be launched at the same time as a national meeting called by the National Health Surveillance Agency on pesticide use in March. According to Dal Soglio, "The EU vote has finally convinced the Brazilian government to re-evaluate pesticide use in Brazil, including these same 22 pesticides – even while pesticide companies have tried to block this move." Dal Soglio is not worried that lower yields will result. "New solutions will be offered through the use of agroecological methods." (MS)

The EU proposal

The European Parliament voted in January 2009 to tighten the use of pesticides in agriculture. All of the EU's 27 member states are expected to support the decision. The proposed legislation is directed at 22 chemicals that are considered most hazardous to human health, including links to cancer, damage to the reproductive and nervous systems, and disruption to hormones. It restricts the spraying of crops – banning wholesale aerial crop-spraying – and bans the use of pesticides near schools, parks and hospitals. Buffer zones would also be mandatory to protect aquatic environments and drinking water from pesticides. The tighter rules aim to halve toxic substances on plants by 2013.

See more at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu>