

Working together for pesticide control

Silvana Buján

The province of Buenos Aires, especially the coastal areas in the south east, is generally considered to be Argentina's most productive agricultural region. Soils are particularly fertile, and fruits and vegetables grown for external markets produce very high yields, making this one of the country's top sources of income. But these yields are also the result of high doses of pesticides and other external inputs, a situation recognized by many as extremely risky. As a local study revealed, environmental and health dangers are very high, because:

- practically all pesticides, including those of restricted use, are easily available;
- farmers have little knowledge regarding their use, or what to do in case of severe intoxication;
- there is virtually no control of the residues left or of the impact these products have, either in the soil or in the fruits and vegetables which are sold.

Passed many years ago, Law 10.699 was intended to regulate the use of pesticides in the province, but it is rarely followed by traders or farmers. As local governments lack the resources and personnel to enforce it, it is commonly known as "the impossible law", and the general situation has only worsened since it was passed.

BIOS, a non-governmental organization working on ecological issues, has been working in the region since 1990. Its main objective is to improve the policies which relate to the general well-being of the population. During the last few years it has organized many events, seminars and courses for the general public, and currently it also gives advice to research institutes and to public and non-governmental organizations. For more than eight years it has run a local radio programme, presenting local and also national and global issues. Working together with other organizations, it regularly campaigns for specific issues, with press releases which highlight a given situation. Through journalists and the media, it tries to reach those living in the urban as well as in the rural areas of the province.

Joint discussion and analysis

Recognizing the many problems which result from the excessive use of pesticides, BIOS organized an open workshop in the municipality of General Pueyrredón and invited all stakeholders to attend. The participants included the local authorities and also representatives of the provincial government, together with lecturers at the local university, local businessmen, farmers and leaders of farmer cooperatives. In a five-hour meeting, BIOS showed and analysed the difficulties and risks resulting from intensive conventional agriculture, and the problems which the excessive use of pesticides causes to soils and plants. In an open discussion, all participants considered the need for greater control and the importance of doing something with "the impossible law".

This meeting, and the information presented thereafter in the media, was very successful in generating awareness. Three months later, at the end of August 2005, BIOS organized a second meeting, inviting the same people and this time also the director of the local hospital. With a full house again, the discussion centred on the risks and dangers which pesticides present for human health, and on the problems arising from the use of restricted and forbidden substances. Both meetings generated a lot of interest from the local press, reflecting the interest of farmers and

consumers, and also a growing interest from the authorities. It was clear that this was not just any topic, but one of such importance that "when it comes into your house, it settles there".

All stakeholders met again only two weeks later, when the local council presented a common action plan resulting from a proposal drafted earlier by BIOS. Through concerted initiatives, this plan expects the local authorities and the ministry of agriculture of the province of Buenos Aires to join efforts in monitoring the distribution, sales and use of pesticides, together with a thorough control of the residues. No new legislation has been approved, but this agreement will help enforce Law 10.699, providing the necessary personnel and resources to ensure that the use of pesticides follows the provisions established in it. The agreement includes the training of local officials, and allows the imposition of fines.



Photo: BIOS

Stakeholders listen to the opinions of the participants during the meeting organized by BIOS.

Positive results

The commitment expressed by the main stakeholders still needs to turn into specific action. Nevertheless, some positive results can already be seen in the organization of the meetings themselves and in the facts that all relevant stakeholders attended, that different perspectives were heard and that an action plan was agreed upon by all. Equally positive and effective has been the role of the media, highlighting an issue of direct concern to the whole province, getting the attention of individuals and institutions, and contributing to an awareness campaign that effectively reached the authorities.

At the moment, there is a shared interest in controlling the use of pesticides, and all actors expect specific actions to be taken. For BIOS, work has just begun, as its chief objective is to reduce the use of pesticides throughout the province. Thus its main interest is in working with farmers and representatives of farmer cooperatives, analysing the problem from their perspective and discussing better alternatives for farming. BIOS hopes that farmers will reduce their use of pesticides, not only as they may otherwise be fined, but rather because they see that it is possible to achieve high yields in a sustainable way without the use of large doses of external inputs. It is therefore planning to monitor the enforcement of Law 10.699 and to continue generating awareness on the importance of its enforcement, but at the same time work with farmers in the promotion and development of an alternative agriculture.

Silvana Buján. BIOS Argentina, La Salle 1699 (7600) Mar del Plata, Buenos Aires, Argentina. Email: Bios_argentina@yahoo.com <http://www.bios.org.ar>