

Monsanto Isn't Feeding the World—It's Killing Our Children

Two new reports issue scathing indictments of U.S. and global regulatory systems in collusion with chemical companies.

By [Katherine Paul](#) / [AlterNet](#) March 17, 2017



Little boy protesting Monsanto Roundup pesticide Photo Credit: Joe Brusky/Flickr CC

“How could we have ever believed that it is a good idea to grow our food with poisons?” — *Dr. Jane Goodall*

Two new reports published in recent weeks add to the already large and convincing body of evidence, accumulated over more than half a century, that agricultural pesticides and other toxic chemicals are poisoning us.

Both reports issue scathing indictments of U.S. and global regulatory systems that collude with chemical companies to hide the truth from the public, while they fill their coffers with ill-gotten profits.

According to the World Health Organization, whose [report](#) focused on a range of environmental risks, the cost of a polluted environment adds up to the deaths of 1.7 million children every year.

A [report](#) by the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, presented to the United Nations Human Rights Council, focused more narrowly on agricultural chemicals. The UN report states unequivocally that the storyline perpetuated by companies like Monsanto—the one that says we need pesticides to feed the world—is a myth. And a catastrophic myth at that.

The fact that both these reports made headlines in mainstream outlets like the Washington Post and the Guardian is, on one hand, good news. On the other, it's a sad and discouraging commentary on our inability to control corporate greed.

Ever since [Rachel Carson](#), in her book *Silent Spring*, so eloquently outlined the insanity of poisoning our environment, rational thinkers have warned that at the least, we ought to follow the precautionary principle when it comes to allowing the widespread use of poisons to be unleashed into the environment.

Yet here we are, in 2017, facing the prospect, in what is unfolding as the most corporate-friendly administration in history, of [dismantling](#) what little remains of the government's ability to stop the rampant poisoning of our soils, food, water, air and wildlife—the very resources upon which all life depends.

In his book, [Poison Spring: The Secret History of Pollution and the EPA](#), published in 2014, E. G.

Vallianatos, who worked for the EPA for 25 years, wrote:

It is simply not possible to understand why the EPA behaves the way it does without appreciating the enormous power of American's industrial farmers and their allies in the chemical

pesticide industries, which currently do about \$40 billion per in year business. For decades, industry lobbyists have preached the gospel of unregulated capitalism, and Americans have bought it. Today, it seems the entire government is at the service of the private interests of America's corporate class.

That was three years ago. As public opinion shifts toward condemnation of the widespread use of toxic chemicals on our food, here in the U.S., government officials entrusted with public health and safety appear more determined than ever to uphold the "rights" of corporations to poison everything in sight, including our children.

'UN experts denounce "myth" pesticides are necessary to feed the world'

The headline in the [Guardian's story](#) on the report delivered this week to the UN Human Rights Council said it all.

From the Guardian:

A [new report](#), being presented to the UN human rights council on Wednesday, is severely critical of the global corporations that manufacture pesticides, accusing them of the "systematic denial of harms," "aggressive, unethical marketing tactics" and heavy lobbying of governments which has "obstructed reforms and paralysed global pesticide restrictions."

The report says pesticides have "catastrophic impacts on the environment, human health and society as a whole," including an estimated 200,000 deaths a year from acute poisoning. Its authors said: "It is time to create a global process to transition toward safer and healthier food and agricultural production."

The UN report was authored by Hilal Elver, special rapporteur on the right to food, and Baskut Tuncak, special rapporteur on "toxics." The report stated that chronic exposure to pesticides has been linked to cancer, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases, hormone disruption, developmental disorders and sterility. It said the populations most at risk are farmers and agricultural workers, communities living near plantations, indigenous communities and pregnant women and children, who are especially vulnerable to pesticide exposure and require special protections.

The Crop Protection Association, a lobbying group representing the \$50-billion agri-chemical industry, fired back at the report with its standard false claim that pesticides "play a key role in ensuring we have access to a

healthy, safe, affordable and reliable food supply." But Elver told the Guardian:

It is a myth. Using more pesticides is nothing to do with getting rid of hunger. According to the UN Food and [Agriculture Organisation \(FAO\)](#), we are able to feed 9 billion people today. Production is definitely increasing, but the problem is poverty, inequality and distribution.

Sustainable Pulse also [reported](#) on the story, noting that the report warns that some pesticides can persist in the environment for decades:

The excessive use of pesticides contaminates soil and water sources, causing loss of biodiversity, destroying the natural enemies of pests, and reducing the nutritional value of food. The impact of such overuse also imposes staggering costs on national economies around the world.

The UN report, which mentioned the efforts of the [Monsanto Tribunal](#) to raise global awareness about the dangers of pesticides, included a long list of recommendations for moving away from chemical-based agriculture. At the top of the list was a call-out to the international community to work on a comprehensive, binding treaty to regulate hazardous pesticides throughout their life cycle, taking into account human rights principles. Such a treaty should:

- Aim to remove existing double standards among countries that are particularly detrimental to countries with weaker regulatory systems
- Generate policies to reduce pesticide use worldwide and develop a framework for the banning and phasing-out of highly hazardous pesticides
- Promote agroecology
- Place strict liability on pesticide producers

'Exposure to pollution kills millions of children'

In a March 5 [story](#), the Washington Post reported on two World Health Organization reports on how exposure to polluted environments is linked to more than one in four deaths among children under the age of five.

Worldwide, the deaths of 1.7 million children are attributable to environmental hazards such as exposure to contaminated water, indoor and outdoor pollution, and other unsanitary conditions. Weaker immune systems make children more vulnerable to the harmful effects of polluted environments, the report says.

According to the WHO reports, which focused on a wide range of chemicals, including those found in food, electronics, contaminated water supplies, second-hand

tobacco smoke, and others, one-fourth of all children's deaths and diseases in 2012 could have been prevented by reducing environmental risks.

From the WHO [press release](#):

Children are also exposed to harmful chemicals through food, water, air and products around them. Chemicals, such as fluoride, lead and mercury pesticides, persistent organic pollutants, and others in manufactured goods, eventually find their way into the food chain. And, while leaded petrol has been phased out almost entirely in all countries, lead is still widespread in paints, affecting brain development.

Authors of the WHO report recommended:

- **Housing:** Ensure clean fuel for heating and cooking, no mould or pests, and remove unsafe building materials and lead paint
- **Schools:** Provide safe sanitation and hygiene, free of noise, pollution, and promote good nutrition
- **Health facilities:** Ensure safe water, sanitation and hygiene, and reliable electricity
- **Urban planning:** Create more green spaces, safe walking and cycling paths
- **Transport:** Reduce emissions and increase public transport
- **Agriculture:** Reduce the use of hazardous pesticides and no child labour
- **Industry:** Manage hazardous waste and reduce the use of harmful chemicals
- **Health sector:** Monitor health outcomes and educate about environmental health effects and prevention

What will it take?

If you find yourself unsurprised by the findings of these reports, or the recommendations that follow, it's no wonder. Many organizations, including ours, have been calling for reforms for decades.

But we can't let our lack of surprise translate into complacency. In an [op-ed](#) published recently in The Hill, Devra Lee Davis, president of the [Environmental Health Trust](#), and author of [The Secret History of the War on Cancer](#), draws the parallel between our failure to regulate the tobacco industry and our failure to regulate the chemicals that today are largely responsible for two sad statistics: 1) one in two of us will be diagnosed with cancer in our lifetimes; and 2) the rate of childhood cancer has increased by 50 percent since President Nixon declared a war on cancer, 40 years ago.

Davis, who says we're fixated on "the wrong enemies, with the wrong weapons," says we should ask ourselves:

Why did we wait until nearly forty years after tobacco was understood to cause cancer and other diseases before mounting a major effort to curtail its production and use? What took us so long to reduce the amount of benzene in gasoline or toxic flame retardants in our waters, food, furniture, bedding, fabrics and breastmilk?

Unfortunately, we know why — corporate control of our regulatory system. Perhaps the better question is, having failed to rein in Congress' loyalty to a handful of ruthless, emboldened corporations, can we elect new people, at every level of our government, who will work for us? More critically, can we do it in time to save ourselves?

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