German biotech giant flees Europe

Jan 23, 2012 by Marcia Ishii-Eiteman

Last week the giant German pesticide and biotech company (and largest chemical company in the world), BASF, announced its decision to pack up and flee Europe.

Why? For 13 years, ordinary Europeans have stood firm in challenging the right of biotech companies to dump their risky genetically engineered (GE) seeds onto their fields and have steadfastly rejected the intrusion of GE foods onto their plates. They built up an informed and powerful citizens' movement that has made itself heard, even over the din of the monied GE lobby. For this, hearty congratulations are due to our cousins across the Atlantic!

We have no chance of a successful commercialization of GM plants in Europe. —Stefan Marcinowski, BASF Board member.

Unfortunately, BASF is headed straight for a research park here in the U.S. — namely the Research Triangle in North Carolina, which has become a hub for the biotech industry. BASF will be joining over 70 agricultural technology companies there, the Winston-Salem Journal reports, including Bayer CropScience and Syngenta.

Not too far off in St. Louis is Monsanto, which BASF is collaborating with on (among other things) a new dicamba-resistant GE crop line. This is yet one more in the pipeline of ecologically disastrous herbicide-resistant GE crops I've been writing about lately.

Americans rejecting GE too

UC Berkeley professor of microbial ecology, Ignacio Chapela, explains what's behind BASF's decision to pull out of Europe in Counter Punch:

> The future holds very little promise for GMOs altogether, and BASF is only the first [company] to have the capacity to recognize the thirty years of bad investments…The reasons for the failure of BASF's products in Europe are many and very diverse, but the fundamental truth stands that over the decades no real benefit has offset the proven harm caused by GMOs.

Indeed. And for this very reason, finally — even on this side of the Atlantic where industry influence often seems to drown out everything else — Americans from all walks of life are saying "no" to GMOs

and to corporate influence over our food and farm policies. See, for example:

- Naomi Starkman's latest piece in the Huffington Post about surging consumer demand for a GE label and the Just Label It campaign;
- the new video on our right to know what's in our food, by Food Inc. filmmaker Robert Kenner;
- the Missouri Farmers' Union policy statement on biotechnology;
- the lawsuit filed against Monsanto last year by 83 family farmers, independent seed businesses and agricultural organizations representing over 300,000 farmers.

With BASF moving into our backyard, and teaming up with the rest of the Big 6 chemical companies, we've got our work cut out for us.

Shred the GE welcome mat

The impacts of BASF's move go beyond Europe and the U.S., Chapela reminds us. "As we celebrate the lifting of perhaps one third of the pressure upon Europe to give in to GMOs, let's not forget those places where they will continue to be used as the effective spear-head of corporate biological mining of other lands."

The implications of BASF relocating to the United States are not limited to intensified pressure on U.S. farmers and farm policy, although I can already hear the clatter of even more industry coins pouring into Congress tills. The additional impacts we can expect — as BASF uses its North American base to push deeper into Latin American and Asian markets — include a likely increase in violent acts against Indigenous and peasant farmers who resist the GE invasion (as has happened in Brazil), further threats to the regions' precious agricultural and biological diversity, and erosion of small-scale farmers' livelihoods.

BASF is one of the world's Big 6 pesticide companies recently indicted for human rights abuses at an international People's Permanent Tribunal. Now it's up to us to transform our outrage at these abuses, take inspiration from our European cousins' perseverance and success, and tear up the GE welcome mat that's been out for far too long here at home.

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