The End of an Era? Roundup Loses Ground

Roundup is in the news quite a lot these days. Earlier this month, Miami banned use of the herbicide, joining dozens of other municipalities across the country—from Santa Rosa, California, to Portland, Maine—that are taking action as concerns mount around the chemical’s impact on public health.

It’s about time. Back in 2015, cancer experts at the World Health Organization found that glyphosate—the active ingredient in Roundup—was a “probable” cause of cancer in humans. Roundup’s maker Monsanto (recently acquired by Bayer) then launched an all-out offensive to discredit the scientists involved in this finding.

Monsanto’s comeuppance
But the cat is out of the bag. Not only is evidence of cancer and additional health effects mounting, it’s also increasingly clear that, for years, then-Monsanto officials were hard at work suppressing science linking their flagship herbicide with health harms. As journalist Carey Gillam documents in her powerful exposé Whitewash, they also waged an aggressive—and successful—campaign to convince EPA regulators to look the other way.

Last August, a California court ordered Monsanto (now Bayer) to pay groundskeeper Dewayne Johnson $250 million in punitive damages and $39.2 million in losses. Johnson is dying of non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, a disease that’s been linked to glyphosate exposure. Johnson made the case that the pesticide maker knew of the risks posed by its product, but failed to warn users—and the jury agreed. Bayer lawyers have, of course, appealed the case but there are now more than 11,000 similar lawsuits in motion.

Publicly, Bayer executives insist they have “full confidence” in the safety of their products. But, behind closed doors, they’re likely rethinking last year’s decision to purchase Monsanto as controversy around the herbicide extends beyond human health harms.

Roots of today’s farm drift crisis
The introduction of “Roundup Ready” corn and soy crops more than two decades ago transformed commodity agriculture across the Midwest. These crops, designed to tolerate application of Roundup, enabled continuous cropping without rotations—and led to dramatic increases in herbicide use across the region.

continued on back page
In 1982, the luster of the “Green Revolution” was beginning to fade. The promised increases in yields from “miracle” hybrid grains that required high inputs of water, chemical fertilizers and pesticides had failed to appear. The global pesticide trade, however, was thriving—yielding dramatic profits for chemical corporations as farmers were lured onto a dangerous pesticide treadmill.

The “Circle of Poison” was a growing global concern, as pesticides banned in some countries were exported to others, only to return as health-harming residues on food imports.

That was the world when PAN International was founded as a global network, at a meeting of activists from around the world in Penang, Malaysia. Two years later, PAN North America was born—and, this year, we’re thrilled to be celebrating 35 years of working to end pesticide reliance and achieve health, resilience and justice in food and farming.

Looking back on what we have accomplished in 35 years, we see how our work has grown. Here are just a few highlights:

• We started off by targeting The Dirty Dozen—twelve of the most harmful pesticides, including DDT—spurring global attention to pesticide poisonings. Our campaign led to action on persistent pesticides, laying the groundwork for the first international chemicals treaty, the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants. Under this treaty, we won global phaseouts for several of the Dirty Dozen persistent pesticides, including DDT, endosulfan and lindane.

• We shone a spotlight on money the World Bank was spending on pesticides, partnering on campaigns around the world to document the harms of these chemicals, and win improved policies at the Bank.

• We co-authored a UN report on agriculture with 400 other scientists from around the world—The International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD)—which led to global experts calling for ecological farming, and FAO hosting two international forums on agroecology.

• We helped (and continue to help) communities to measure pesticide drift in their homes, schools and farms by inventing the Drift Catcher. PAN scientists also worked with California partners to measure drift and pesticides in the bodies of community members, eventually leading to EPA acknowledging the hazards of pesticide drift. We then worked with communities to win protective buffer zones and reporting requirements.

And the work continues. Today, we’re working with Iowa farmers to tackle herbicide drift, winning groundbreaking protections for pollinators in Minnesota, and building on the ban of brain-harming chlorpyrifos in Hawai’i to press for similar state laws in California, Oregon and Maryland—as well as a national ban. We continue to spotlight the undue influence of pesticide corporations like Bayer (Monsanto) and Dow (Corteva), while they continue to merge and rebrand to avoid accountability.

But it’s the way we do this work that makes us successful. We work in partnership with communities on the frontlines of industrial agriculture, support grassroots and coalition organizing, and facilitate relationships and networks of partners and other allies—state, national and international—in order to build a more powerful movement.

Our dedicated community of supporters helps to make it all happen. We would love for you to join us in celebrating 35 years of PAN North America! Find some of the activities we’re planning for our anniversary in the box to the left. We’d also love to hear from you about why you support PAN’s work.

If you’d like to be included in a video/audio project we’re putting together, please email social@panna.org, telling us how you became involved, and why PAN’s work is important to you.

Time to celebrate!

PAN staff have been hard at work planning celebrations around our 35-year milestone with a number of special events and programming both on and offline. Keep an eye out for the following:

Online
• Guest blogs from former PAN staff, board members and partners, sharing stories from their time working with PAN and what they have been working on since.
• A special video and audio project commemorating the anniversary. We’d love for you to contribute!

In person
• House parties across the country hosted by PAN board members and friends. If you’re interested in hosting a house party, please email giving@panna.org.
• Two big celebrations this fall, in the Bay Area and in Iowa, featuring speakers, music, food, and you! Details to come!
How “Circle of Poison” Sparked a Global Network
A Conversation with Monica Moore

To kick off our 35th anniversary, our Executive Director Kristin Schafer recently had a conversation with PAN North America’s founding director— and her longtime mentor— Monica Moore.

You were involved with PAN before it was officially founded as an organization. What brought people together to form a global network? And how did you get involved?

PAN was sparked by the book Circle of Poison: Pesticides and People in a Hungry World, which documented how pesticides that had been banned for health and environmental reasons in northern countries were still produced and exported to developing countries. The banned pesticides were causing tremendous damage in those countries, and were also re-imported back to their home countries as food residues.

I was living in southern Brazil when Circle of Poison came out, volunteering with organizations working on environmental and agricultural issues, indigenous peoples’ rights, and women’s issues. I was surprised to find they were all working together on pesticide-related issues, and began learning about all the linkages.

You established the North America office two years after the global network was founded. What were some of the challenges you faced in those early years?

The transition from volunteer collective to organization was challenging and exciting. We learned how to fundraise to support the work, and set up systems to manage staff, volunteers and funding for our own work and also for allied organizations. We learned as we went, expanding our capacities to overcome obstacles and face changing political environments. It was humbling, fulfilling, and every year was different!

What achievement are you most proud of from your time at PAN?

I’m most proud of how PAN has helped expand the definition of the food system, and broaden the base of people and communities working to improve it. PAN’s work on pesticides and alternatives is inherently multi-racial, crosses many issue areas, and links from local to global. PAN has always sought to honor the reality that people on the ground can best develop solutions to deal with the issues they face. Outsiders can contribute and can provide essential support, but people on the frontlines have real power when they speak their own truth.

You directed PAN North America for 25 years. What have you been doing since leaving PAN 10 years ago? How did your work at PAN influence that work?

When I first left PAN, I had a brief stint doing policy work in Brussels. It was fascinating working on EU issues, but I realized I felt more rooted in the U.S. I then went into philanthropy, where my work has focused on emerging technologies—who controls them and how they will be used. This is at the root of PAN’s work as well.

I call on things I learned and experienced at PAN every day of my life, both professionally and personally, from the importance of relationships to insights on power dynamics and the overriding importance of respect and trust.

What current PAN work or campaigns are you excited about?

I find the state-based work really exciting, and every time a specific pesticide goes down it’s a great win—like when endosulfan was banned, and now chlorpyrifos is finally on the way out. All these victories matter, but of course there’s much more to be done, and I’m glad PAN continues building its capacity to take on bigger challenges.

People’s lives and struggles are always at the core. I see PAN continuing to create connections through the food system to lift up this reality and give it more relevance and meaning. That’s why I’m thrilled to remain a strong PAN supporter in whatever way I can.

Sustain PAN’s Work
Give Monthly

When you join PAN as a Sustainer, you become part of a vital group that donates each month to fund grassroots science, collaboration with frontline communities and policy change.

We rely on consistent support from Sustainers to work towards a healthy, fair and resilient system of food and farming.

Become a Sustainer today by going to www.panna.org/give-monthly.

“T’m most proud of how PAN has helped expand the definition of the food system, and broaden the base of people and communities working to improve it.”
Glyphosate, continued from front page

This ongoing, widespread use of a single chemical has also, of course, led to weed resistance. By some estimates more than 60 million acres of farmland are now overrun by pigweed, mar-estail and other aggressive weeds that Roundup can no longer control. In response, pesticide corporations have introduced new genetically engineered (GE) crops designed to tolerate more powerful herbicides, like dicamba and 2,4-D. Both of these antiquated chemicals have been on the market for decades but fell out of favor because of their high toxicity and propensity to drift, until their recent resurgence.

Sure enough, over the past two seasons, more than 15 million acres of crops—both non-resistant commodity crops and specialty crops of all kinds—have been damaged by dicamba drift. The estimated financial losses for farmers are staggering and many are now buying dicamba-tolerant seeds out of desperation, and against their better judgment.

Seeds, weeds & resilience
At the same time, weed scientists are warning that resistance to dicamba is developing fast and that this herbicide will probably stop working in a few years as well. In this classic example of what PAN calls the “pesticide treadmill,” farmers find themselves with fewer and fewer options while rural communities face increasingly contaminated air and water. The only winners here are the pesticide corporations that continue to profit from their endless pipeline of new GE seed/herbicide product lines.

But this appears to be shifting.

As the failure of the chemical-intensive system becomes increasingly clear, many farmers are looking to alternative approaches. Conversations about agroecology, healthy soils and regenerative agriculture are gaining traction at Midwest farming conferences, as farmers and farm communities consider new, more resilient scenarios for the future of grain.

In the end, perhaps this will be the ironic, unexpected legacy of Roundup: hastening a shift away from reliance on toxic chemicals and toward more sustainable farming. Surely neither this nor the 11,000+ pending lawsuits are what Bayer executives hoped for when they purchased Monsanto last year. But it does seem somehow fitting.

PAN Staff Transitions

After eight years as our Organizing Director, Paul Towers (top left) has taken a job as Executive Director of one of our allied organizations, the Community Alliance with Family Farmers. We look forward to continuing to work with Paul in his new role!

Going forward, Policy Advocate and Organizer Medha Chandra (top right) will lead our California policy work, Communications and Media Director Ahna Kruzic (bottom left) is our primary press contact, and Linda Wells (bottom right) will be Organizing Director organization-wide, not just in the Midwest.