



Photo: Joshua Resnick

It's Time to Vote for Food and Farming

by Kristin Schafer

The phrase “food is political” pops up all the time in the food and farm movement world, and has particular weight right now as we head toward the finish line of this incredibly fraught and consequential election season. So what, exactly, does it mean?

Are we talking about “voting with dollars” to move markets in the directions we need? Showing up in the streets to demand the racial justice that’s so crucial in our food system work? Supporting legislation that moves resources to community-scale farmers and the essential workers who continue to harvest, process and serve food during a pandemic?

Or voting for candidates who commit to building a healthier food and farming system that’s a solution, rather than contributor, to climate change?

Yes. All of the above—and so much more.

An Iowa radish story

One of my favorite stories showing just how political food is takes place on a small farm in western Iowa.

Several years ago, longtime organic farmer (and former PAN board president) Denise O’Brien showed my colleague Marcia Ishii-Eiteman how she uses deep-growing daikon radishes to “biodrill,” building nourishing, aerated soil for fruits and vegetables on her Rolling Acres farm.

Marcia, one of PAN’s senior scientists, was wowed by the simple brilliance of the practice, and asked Denise her opinion on what’s needed—what’s “the most important thing we can do”—to support more farmers adopting similar strategies? Denise’s response was quick and firm: “campaign finance reform.”

Money, politics & food

Money in politics—in this case, money from giant pesticide corporations—is a very real barrier to change.

Ramping up on-farm innovations, like using deep-growing radishes to build healthy soil, bumps up against all the policy incentives pushing farmers in the opposite direction. Our national farm policies encourage growers to continue relying heavily on chemical inputs, and the seeds that are genetically engineered to promote pesticide use. We call this the “pesticide treadmill,” and it’s a great business model for the pesticide industry.

Many of the politicians who, time after time, vote to keep these policies in place rely on corporations like Bayer/Monsanto, Corteva/Dow or Syngenta for their job security. Which means they have the interests of these corporate donors top of mind, rather than the well-being of farmers, farmworkers, rural families or consumers across the country.

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PAN Latin America Tackles Pesticide Drift

PAN Latin America (La Red de Acción en Plaguicidas y sus Alternativas para América Latina—or RAPAL) is one of the five regional centers around the world that make up PAN International. The coordination of RAPAL rotates among national organizations across the region, and is currently held by the Centro de Estudios Sobre Tecnologías Apropriadas de Argentina (CETAAR), which is led by Dr. Javier Souza Casadinho, whose work in Argentina is highlighted here.



In Argentina, RAPAL carries out research, training and political advocacy with communities affected by pesticides that drift into their homes and schools from agricultural fields.

The dramatic rise of monocultures over the past decade has driven increased use of pesticides and fertilizers in Argentina, contaminating water, soil and air and exposing people to these toxic chemicals. As RAPAL coordinator Javier Souza explains, pesticide applications by airplanes and self-propelled vehicles in industrial farming operations cause particles to drift far from where they are applied, especially on hot and windy days. “Communities exposed to this drift are now organizing to document the harms of pesticides and call for safer forms of production.”



One small community near the city of Córdoba has fought hard for their right to health. Here, in a soybean growing region in the center of Argentina, a local group called Mothers of Ituzaingó formed to challenge use of these chemicals in fields surrounding their homes. The grassroots group worked with RAPAL and other partners to document the health harms of pesticide exposure, and have employed a number of strategies—including legal action—to successfully limit applications.

“We accompanied the Mothers of Ituzaingó in their struggle,” says Javier. “We hosted training workshops on the use of pesticides and their effect on health, distributed leaflets and brochures on pesticides, and participated in forums held in the community.”

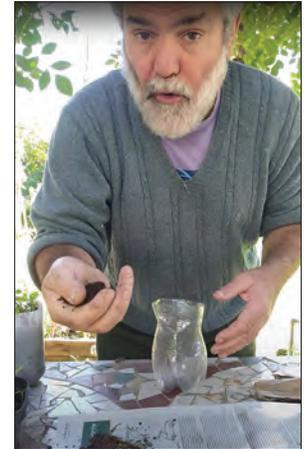
RAPAL has supported other communities that organize themselves to take legal action in the face of pesticide harms as well. In two civil trials currently being carried out by Argentine communities, one in the province of Entre Ríos and the other in the district of Pergamino, RAPAL’s 2019 report on Highly Hazardous Pesticides (HHPs) is

being used as evidence. A criminal trial, where nearly 60 people have been affected by pesticide exposure, was to begin in March of this year and has been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Working closely with community leaders and institutions, RAPAL has also helped win local ordinances that limit the use of pesticides across the country, including the districts of Marcos Paz, Cañuelas, Lujan, and Mercedes Ramallo. At the provincial level, policies have been won in Buenos Aires and Misiones (in the north of Argentina). In some of these districts, companion regulations have also been passed to promote agroecological production.

During the pandemic, Javier has conducted a series of online workshops, encouraging people to produce food locally without chemical inputs—a hands-on application of RAPAL’s mission.

“We firmly believe in working in and with communities affected most by pesticide applications to generate joint activities and advocacy campaigns,” Javier concludes. “Together, we work to promote agroecology and generate healthy food for all.” —



Javier has produced a series of online workshops on agroecological farming during COVID-19.

ABOUT PAN PAN works to create a just, thriving food system, working with those on the frontlines to tackle the pesticide problem—and reclaim the future of food and farming. One of five regional centers worldwide, PAN North America links local and international consumer, labor, health, environment and agriculture groups into an international citizens’ action network. Together, we challenge the global proliferation of pesticides, defend basic rights to health and environmental quality, and work to ensure the transition to a just and viable food system.

Voting: A good place to start

Every election year, we encourage our supporters to find out where their candidates stand on food and farming issues. This fall, voters can start by asking where congressional candidates stand on a recent federal bill that would completely revamp our pesticide rules.

The Protect America's Children from Toxic Pesticides Act, introduced by Sen. Udall (D-NM) and Rep. Neguse (D-CO), would protect people, pollinators and more from the most dangerous chemicals through basic, common sense reforms that are sorely needed and long overdue.

For those who are able to vote, we urge you to choose political leaders on election day who support a healthier food system that's firmly rooted in justice. Even for those who aren't eligible, there are many ways to get involved, including contacting candidates directly with your top priorities, participating in online candidate fora, and supporting "get out the vote" efforts.

We'll be sharing tools, resources and reminders along these lines, and we'll also be actively supporting efforts to protect and strengthen voting rights. No matter what your top priorities are, a functioning democracy is critical for us all.

To win more support for innovative, radish-wielding farmers like Denise, we need politicians who answer to the people, not



Photo: Kristin S. Schafer

Iowa farmer Denise O'Brien (left) works to get corporate money out of politics, and to choose leaders who support a healthier food system that's firmly rooted in justice.

corporate donors. We know we'll still need to keep the pressure on to make these leaders actually do the right thing once elected. But voting them in will create opportunities for the real changes we need—which gives me hope. And that's a very good place to start. —🌱



PAN Staff at Home

How have PAN staff adjusted to working remotely this year during COVID-19? Membership associate Corrie Holliday shares a deck "office" with a fluffy colleague, while office administrator Tiffany Seals' furry friend reminds her to take a break! Senior staff scientist Marcia Ishii-Eiteman and Minnesota organizer Willa Childress love to spend time outside in their gardens, while communications associate Rob Faux harvests carrots on his farm, and California team intern Tucker Matta stays energized with an afternoon photoshoot and a delicious vegan lunch.



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