

Toxic Drift: Monsanto and the Drug War in Colombia

By Jeremy Bigwood (CorpWatch)

A prominent U.S. Senator and other government officials from both Washington and Bogotá stood on a Colombian mountainside above fields of lime-green coca—the plant sacred to Andean Indians, but also the source of the troublesome drug cocaine. They were awaiting a demonstration of aerial herbicide spraying, part of the U.S. drug war in Colombia. The spectacle, put on by the U.S. embassy in Bogotá last December, was supposed to address Senator Paul Wellstone's doubts about the accuracy and safety of the U.S.-sponsored drug fumigation program. Wellstone, a Democrat from Minnesota, is a fierce critic of military aid to Colombia and the demonstration needed to come off without a hitch, to win him over to the use of aerially sprayed herbicides. The night before, U.S. officials had responded to the Senator's skeptical questions by assuring him that the spraying would target coca fields without harming food crops.

"They had said that by using satellite images they could hit very precisely targets without any chance of danger to surrounding crops," said Jim Farrell, Wellstone's spokesperson, who was also there. However that turned out not to be the case. "On the very first flyover by the cropduster, the U.S. Senator, the U.S. Ambassador to Colombia, the Lieutenant Colonel of the Colombian National Police, and other Embassy and congressional staffers were fully doused-drenched, in fact—with the sticky, possibly dangerous (herbicide) Roundup."

"Imagine what is happening when a high-level congressional delegation is not present," Farrell noted, pointing out that careful preparation had gone into the botched flyover. Wellstone left Colombia completely unconvinced by the Embassy.

The United States has sprayed tons of Roundup and Roundup Ultra, produced by the St. Louis-based chemical and biotechnology giant, Monsanto, during the 24 year-long drug war in Colombia. The use of these herbicides (both of which we refer to as Roundup in this story) has consistently produced health complaints from campesinos in the Colombian countryside. Those complaints have gone largely ignored by government officials in Washington and corporate honchos within Monsanto. Meanwhile, Monsanto's sordid history as the manufacturer of Agent Orange, a defoliant used during the Vietnam war, raises serious questions about its role in Colombia's drug war and the need for transparency in its dealings with Washington.

A month before Wellstone was doused with Roundup, Colombian indigenous leaders visited Congress to personally speak out against the fumigation: "The twelve indigenous peoples have been suffering under this plague as if it were a government decree to exterminate our culture and our very survival," said José Francisco Tenorio, the only leader who was not afraid to use his real name. "Our legal crops—our only sustenance—manioc, banana, palms, sugar cane, and corn

have been fumigated. Our sources of water, creeks, rivers, lakes, have been poisoned, killing our fish and other living things. Today, hunger is our daily bread. In the name of the Amazonian indigenous people I ask that the fumigations be immediately suspended."

So far, Tenorio's pleas have fallen on deaf ears. Last summer, Congress approved \$1.3 billion for "Plan Colombia" to carry out the drug war there and more funds are forthcoming in the "Andean Regional Initiative," a bill presently moving through Congress.

Official Denial

U.S. officials proudly point to the large number of hectares of coca and poppy eradicated as proof that the fumigation is successful. But they strongly discourage journalists from probing the effects of aerial spraying any further. Last January, during a meeting with U.S. Embassy staff in Bogotá, the top officer at the State Department's Narcotics Affairs Section was emphatic and his tone threatening: "You cannot mention Monsanto!" he boomed, spit flying from his mouth. CorpWatch was a little taken aback, but also very amused: Monsanto is a major part of the Colombia story, and there is no way to ignore it.

Meanwhile, a State Department official in Washington recently told CorpWatch that the relationship between the U.S. government and Monsanto "is proprietary information between us and our supplier. It's exempt from the FOIA requirements too, so I don't think you will be able to get it."

Monsanto has been equally tight lipped. "We don't divulge information about who we sell our product to, or the size of the contract or anything like that, so I can't confirm that... I will not confirm that it is our product that is being used in Colombia," says Janice Armstrong, Monsanto public affairs director for Roundup.

Who Profits?

Almost 70,000 gallons of Roundup have been sprayed in Colombia so far this year, according to calculations based on amounts sprayed per hectare. Last year, roughly 145,750 gallons were sprayed over 53,00 hectares, according to a State Department official who asked not to be named. These numbers do not take into account all of the fumigation of drug crops with Roundup in Colombia since 1978. With a retail price between \$33.00 to \$45.00 per gallon, and a wholesale price of perhaps less than half of that (Monsanto refused to confirm the wholesale price for such volumes), this represents tens of thousands, or more, U.S. taxpayer dollars.

Meanwhile, Monsanto boasts almost \$5.5 billion in sales last year. Those sales generated almost \$150 million in profits. Roundup is the world's number one herbicide and the company's flagship product. Monsanto is also involved in developing biotech agriculture and has manufactured "Roundup Ready" soybeans and other crops that resist the herbicide. The corporate giant is no stranger to the corridors of power in Washington. It employs a prestigious lobbying firm to represent its interests on Capitol Hill. President Bush's Agriculture Secretary, Ann

Veneman, was on the board of Calgene, another biotechnology company that was purchased by Monsanto. Monsanto donated \$12,000 directly to Bush's presidential campaign as well as contributed to industry PACs. During the 2000 elections Monsanto dropped \$74,000 on congressional campaigns, most of it to Republicans.

Agent Orange: Déjà vu all over again?

For many, Monsanto's Roundup is a case of déjà vu. This is not the first time that a Monsanto herbicide product has been accused of doing ecological damage and harm to humans during a war. To understand the potential ramifications of the use of Roundup in Colombia, it is worth looking at the consequences of Agent Orange in Vietnam. During the Vietnam War, the U.S. used a series of chemical defoliant "agents" named for the green, pink, blue, purple, and orange colored rings around their oil drum containers. The concept was to remove cover-foliage from the guerilla enemy to make it vulnerable to attack. One of the herbicides used was called Agent Orange (a 50/50 mixture of herbicides 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T), and it proved very effective. However, there was a problem: varying amounts of a breakdown product of the "dioxin" class called TCDD were part of the mixture.

Later-and far too late for many people-TCDD was shown to have various, very serious toxic effects. According to the 1994 Seventh Annual Report on Carcinogens, Agent Orange causes "toxic effects in animals includ[ing] the wasting syndrome, gastric ulcers, immunotoxicity, hepatotoxicity, hepatoporphyria, vascular lesions, chloracne, teratogenicity, fetotoxicity, impaired reproductive performance, endometriosis and delayed death." It also proved toxic to humans. The application of Agent Orange and TCDD not only deforested large areas of Vietnam, but it also caused over 50,000 birth defects and hundreds of thousands of cancers both in Vietnamese civilians and soldiers, as well as in former U.S. troops serving in South East Asia. The effects of Agent Orange are still being experienced, 26 years after the end of the war.

This was bad enough, but after the war it came to light that Monsanto had known about this toxicity many years before, as early as the late 1940s, and had tried to cover it up. At that time, Monsanto workers had regularly become sick with symptoms such as skin rashes, joint and limb pain, after being exposed to 2,4,5-T, the specific Agent Orange component that breaks down to form TCDD. After the end of the war, U.S. Vietnam veterans sued Monsanto for causing their illnesses. The company settled out of court, paying them about \$80 million in damages. The Vietnamese victims received nothing.

Given this history, it is not surprising that neither U.S. officials nor Monsanto executives want a spotlight shone on the use of the company's products in Colombia, where many of the post-contact symptoms of those sprayed with Roundup are similar to those noted by the Monsanto employees in the 1940s and soldiers and civilians who were sprayed with Agent Orange in Vietnam.

Unlike Agent Orange, Roundup is also marketed for civilian use as a safe herbicide. So far, there have been no substantiated claims of gross human toxicity that

compare with Agent Orange. Indeed, it is available in the U.S. as an over-the-counter weed killer in most U.S. hardware stores. "Roundup has a long history of safe use when used according to directions," says Monsanto spokesperson Janice Armstrong, who points out that the herbicide is sold in 130 countries.

However, even Monsanto's own warnings point to toxicity: "Roundup will kill almost any green plant that is actively growing. Roundup should not be applied to bodies of water such as ponds, lakes or streams as Roundup can be harmful to certain aquatic organisms. After an area has been sprayed with Roundup, people and pets (such as cats and dogs) should stay out of the area until it is thoroughly dry. We recommend that grazing animals such as horses, cattle, sheep, goats, rabbits, tortoises and fowl remain out of the treated area for two weeks. If Roundup is used to control undesirable plants around fruit or nut trees, or grapevines, allow twenty-one days before eating the fruits or nuts."

Information Slowly Comes Out

As Monsanto and U.S. officials stand by the safety of spraying Roundup aerially, journalists and scientists are beginning to uncover some new facts. Last December, Dutch journalist Marjon Van Royen investigated the health reports on the ground in Colombia, and found that "because the chemical is sprayed in Colombia from planes on inhabited areas, there have been consistent health complaints [in humans]. Burning eyes, dizziness and respiratory problems being most frequently reported." Although Roundup is billed as "safe" for mammals including humans by the U.S. State Department (but not to some insects or aquatic life), there have been too many persistent reports of skin and other problems after fumigation incidents involving farmers and their animals to ignore. Digging further, Van Royen found something alarming: another additive called Cosmo-Flux 411 F was being added to increase Roundup's toxicity. The Roundup/Cosmo-Flux mixture has never been scientifically evaluated nor has the public, either in the U.S. or in Colombia, been informed of this practice.

Recently, Colombian biologist and chemist Dr. Elsa Nivia has shown that the enhancement of toxicity by the additive could be responsible for the human health problems attributed to Roundup. In a talk at the University of California in Davis in May, Dr. Nivia said: "the [Roundup Ultra] mixture with the Cosmo Flux 411 F surfactant can increase the herbicide's biological action fourfold, producing relative exposure levels which are 104 times higher than the recommended doses for normal agricultural applications in the United States; doses which, according to the study mentioned, can intoxicate and even kill ruminants." The use of this enhanced Roundup would not be acceptable in the U.S. without prior testing and scientific evaluation.

Furthermore, the label Roundup label warns that: "It is a violation of Federal law to use this product in any manner inconsistent with its labeling. Do not apply this product in a way that will contact workers or other persons, either directly or through drift. Only protected handlers may be in the area during application."

"Drift" is a major issue, as Senator Wellstone discovered first-hand. The small cropduster airplanes and helicopters that spray chemical herbicides in Colombia often fly too high to accurately target the drug crops. For instance, a small plane flying at 65 feet is subject to the common 15-45 foot-high crosswinds that characterize rainforest ecology. These winds easily blow or "drift" the herbicide to non-target areas producing the destruction of other crops, rainforest or bodies of water. Last spring, GTZ, the German government version of USAID, lodged serious complaints against the fumigation because either consciously or due to "drift," the fumigation was destroying the Colombian "aquiculture" project they had underwritten-fishponds that provide protein for campesino subsistence.

The Colombian government's own Human Rights Ombudsman's Office called for an end to the fumigation earlier this year. Repeated claims of foodcrop eradication, fishpond poisoning and health effects have led some campesinos and indigenous groups in Colombia to surmise that the U.S. anti-drug program is targeting them as alleged guerrilla supporters, an accusation which many in the countryside deny. They say U.S. officials hope to drive them from the conflictive areas, thereby producing thousands of refugees. While the ecological destruction and human health impacts attributed to Roundup may not be a deliberate part of Washington's policy, at the very least U.S. officials seem indifferent to the "collateral damage" caused by the drug war. And Monsanto, which tried to cover up the dangers of Agent Orange 30 years ago, has more at stake than a cushy government contract. If its flagship herbicide, sold around the globe, proves harmful in Colombia, consumers just might wonder if it's safe to spray in their backyards.

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Source: CorpWatch, www.corpwatch.org