

HOW THE
AGROINDUSTRY
BROUGHT DOWN THE
EU PESTICIDE LAW
AND HOW TO AVOID FALLING
INTO THEIR
LOBBYING TRAPS
AGAIN



Despite the well-documented risks pesticides pose to biodiversity and human health¹, the European Union has consistently failed to make meaningful progress in reducing pesticide use, with pesticide sales barely decreasing over the last decade. Back in 2020, the European Commission announced its flagship Green Deal, promising to reform our food and agricultural system, including the objective to halve the use and risk of pesticides by 2030. However, when a regulation was introduced to turn this goal into binding targets (known as the Sustainable Use Regulation), it became the target of relentless behind-the-scenes lobbying by the pesticide and broader agroindustry. Creating fears of food shortages and perpetuating false narratives around food security, this coordinated lobbying led to the regulation's downfall, leaving European citizens and nature exposed to toxic chemicals.

THIS BRIEFING OUTLINES HOW THE AGROINDUSTRY'S LOBBYING STRATEGIES DISMANTLED THIS CRUCIAL PESTICIDE LEGISLATION, THE DIRE CONSEQUENCES THAT FOLLOW - AND HOW TO MOVE FORWARD.

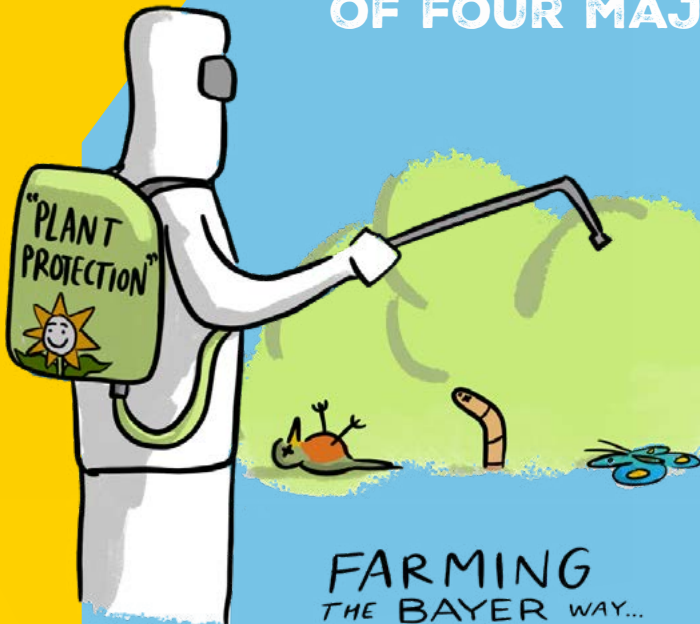
THE AGROINDUSTRY GIANTS BEHIND THE FALL

While they publicly professed support for the EU Green Deal and Farm to Fork targets, including on pesticide reduction, the four major global pesticide corporations – Syngenta, Bayer, Corteva and BASF² – spent millions lobbying to delay, weaken and eventually derail any meaningful regulation. They coordinated their efforts through lobby groups such as CropLife Europe and Euroseeds, using consultancy and law firms, think tanks and media companies to influence EU policy makers.

Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO) - a research and campaign organisation working to expose and challenge the corporate influence over EU policy making, revealed that these four corporations, together with their lobby groups and think tanks³ - spent up to €50 million on lobbying between 2020 and 2023 (on all policy issues including the pesticide reduction law)⁴. This figure is likely a gross understatement, as many lobbying activities are under-reported because self-reported by the industry. For example, a single contract between Monsanto (now Bayer) and the consultancy Fleishman Hillard was worth 14.5 million euros alone⁵.

Copa-Cogeca, the key European farming lobby group, is not included in this calculation and self-declared an annual lobbying spending of €1.5 million⁶. As one of the most active lobby groups in the EU, it has played a prominent role in efforts to weaken the EU pesticide law. An investigation by Lighthouse revealed that Copa-Cogeca exaggerates the number of farmers it claims to represent, actually prioritising the interests of industrial agriculture operations over those of smaller-scale farmers⁷. Furthermore, Copa-Cogeca's position on the pesticide law closely aligns with the industry interests. Reports from CEO show how, together with CropLife Europe, they coordinated their lobbying strategies to undermine and derail the pesticide law.

THE PESTICIDE MARKET IS HIGHLY CONCENTRATED IN THE HANDS OF FOUR MAJOR PRODUCERS



- Syngenta, bought by ChemChina, a Chinese public corporation which has become the largest global conglomerate in the chemicals sector following its merger with Sinochem
- Bayer, a German corporation and one of the historic leaders in the pesticides sector, whose growth is largely based on successive company takeovers. The agricultural division ('Crop Science'), which brings together pesticides and

VISUAL THINKERY

seeds, accounts for just 45% of total sales, with the remainder coming from pharmaceutical and human health activities. Since 2018 it now includes the American corporation Monsanto. Bayer is one of the European corporations spending most on lobbying in the EU⁸ - up to €8 million in 2023 according to the self-declared EU lobby register.

- Corteva, an American corporation issued from the merger between the agrochemical divisions of Dow Chemicals and DuPont
- BASF, a German corporation active in agriculture (pesticides and seeds), but also chemicals, plastics, oil and gas derivatives, personal care products and nutrition products. It is one of Europe's leading chemical corporations.

Together, these four corporations' control around 65% of the global pesticide market. In the EU alone, the pesticide business is worth more than **€12 billion annually**⁹. Bayer, BASF and Corteva are all boosted by the same American investment funds - Blackrock, Vanguard, State Street, Capital Group and Fidelity - who also profit from continued pesticide dependency.

WHAT WAS IN THE PESTICIDE REDUCTION LAW

Back in June 2022, the European Commission published its proposal for a new law - known as the Sustainable Use Regulation - to align with the Green Deal and Farm to Fork Strategy's goal to reduce by 50% the use and risk of pesticides¹⁰. For the first time, this pesticide law proposed legally binding targets for the reduction of pesticides both at European and

national level. It would have replaced the current EU Sustainable Use of Pesticides Directive, transforming it into a Regulation and therefore making the rules directly binding in all EU Member States. Considering the very limited progress to reduce pesticides in most countries¹¹, the change to a Regulation aimed at achieving more effective implementation.

A COORDINATED AND DECEITFUL LOBBYING CAMPAIGN

THE PESTICIDE LOBBY AND THEIR ALLIES DEPLOYED A RANGE OF TACTICS TO DISMANTLE THE PESTICIDE REGULATION:

Creating and spreading fears: The agro-industry has spread coordinated and misleading messages and perpetuating false narratives around food security¹². Scientists are clear that Europe can only secure a sustainable food future in the long-term by greening our agriculture model¹³. Despite experts having shown that synthetic pesticides are not necessary to feed the world¹⁴, the industry lobby has repeatedly used paid academic studies to claim the contrary. These studies have been criticised by scientists, independent think tanks and NGOs for their bias and for ignoring crucial parameters, including positive ecological feedback loops (e.g. increased pollination, improvement of soil fertility and health, better resilience to pests or extreme weather events), food waste reduction, dietary shifts, farm subsidies, and other supportive public policies¹⁵.

Delays disguised as impact assessments: the industry repeatedly called for additional impact assessments¹⁶ strategically exploiting the war in Ukraine to raise fear about food access. Their goal was to buy time until the law's window of opportunity closed. This tactic is familiar to the one used by the fossil fuel lobby or Big Tobacco¹⁷, calling for more research as well as manipulating and steering the science, as a mean to buy time and prevent regulations.

Sabotage through weakening: even as they delayed the law, they worked behind the scenes to strip it of its most important provisions, ensuring that if it were passed, it would be toothless. There is for instance evidence of the pesticide industry and Copa-Cogeca pushing against the binding targets for pesticide reduction¹⁸. Even before the law was introduced, Copa-Cogeca sent recommendations to the Parliament advocating for deleting any reference to binding legislations to achieve the Green Deal targets, including on pesticides¹⁹. The pesticide industry also attacked the proposed ban of synthetic pesticides in sensitive areas, including through sponsored "studies" with a consultancy frequently used by pesticide and other agribusiness corporations²⁰.

Greenwashing their image: the industry portrayed itself as a legitimate partner in the green transition, selling "digital agriculture", "precision farming" and "new genomic techniques" (new GMOs) as solutions for pesticide reduction. This is not surprising considering the main corporations behind these new GMOs are actually the same corporations (Bayer, Corteva, BASF and Syngenta) producing pesticides. In reality, evidence shows that new GMOs are unlikely to reduce pesticide use - some are even designed to increase it, and the corporations' profits at the same time²¹. In addition to its environmental impact, this emerging agricultural model risks further increasing farmers' dependency on the agroindustry.



US GOVERNMENT-FUNDED "PRIVATE SOCIAL NETWORK" ATTACKING PESTICIDE CRITICS AND FUELLING MISINFORMATION



An [investigation](#) from Lighthouse Reports and others revealed how an US based firm, v-Fluence –founded by a former Monsanto executive– led a secret campaign to undermine critics of pesticides and genetically modified organisms (GMOs)²². This campaign was funded in part by public money, with the US Department of Agriculture giving a contract worth up to \$4.9 million - as part of a strategy focused on derailing the EU Farm to Fork Strategy.

The firm, founded by a former Monsanto executive, created a private social network called "Bonus Eventus," which profiles over 3000 organisations and 500 environmental activists, journalists, scientists, UN experts and others seen as threats to industry interests. The database includes information on family members, home addresses and other personal details.



Through "reputation management" tactics, the company aimed to diminish opposition and facilitate GMO acceptance, shape global pesticide policy, and hinder support for more sustainable forms of farming. Thematic factsheets are also made available, to provide narratives or arguments in response to criticism of pesticides and GMOs.

Around a thousand people have been given access to the platform. Among them are executives from Syngenta, Bayer, BASF, Corteva and CropLife, as well as officials from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the State Department.

The firm's efforts highlight the close collaboration between pesticide corporations, industry advocates, and governments to shape public perception and policy in favour of the agrochemical industry, relying on covert information-gathering and strategic misinformation.

A PRIVILEGED ACCESS TO DECISION MAKERS

The agroindustry's lobbying did not stop at think tanks and media campaigns, they also regularly enjoy privileged access to key decision making in issues related to food and agriculture.

- ✦ **EU Council:** Copa-Cogeca, the EU's largest farming lobby group, is the only group invited to discuss with the president of the Council before every meeting of Europe's agriculture ministers.
- ✦ **EU Commission:** Copa-Cogeca also has the largest number of seats on civil dialogue groups that assist and advise the Commission.
- ✦ **EU Parliament:** An investigation by DeSmog uncovered the depth of this privileged relationship, showing that six MEPs from the European People's Party of the 2019-2024 mandate met with industry-linked groups eight times more frequently than with NGOs defending public interests. The European People Party has been by far the most vocal political party against the pesticide law.

These privileged channels of influence allowed the industry to shape the legislative process across EU institutions. Their lobbying tactics not only swayed Member States but also the European Parliament, where conservative and right-wing parties, along with some members of the centre left, significantly weakened the proposed pesticide law. This deliberate dilution led to its rejection. A few months later, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced the withdrawal of the text, suggesting a new proposal might be introduced but without committing to a new timeline.

The abandonment of the pesticide law by the European Commission was celebrated by Copa-Cogeca, as shown by [this post on X²³](#).



CONSEQUENCES: WHO BENEFITS AND WHO LOSES?

The agroindustry's victory was a devastating loss for public health, farmers, consumers and biodiversity. While Big Agri including large-scale distribution - reaps the rewards of an intensive agricultural model that promotes pesticide use, farmers, consumers and nature are left to bear the costs.

- ✦ **Societal costs:** Studies show that the societal costs of pesticide use far exceed the profits of the industry. A 2017 report by BASIC estimated that pesticide-related costs borne by Europeans amounted to €2.3 billion²⁴, twice as high as the net profits of the pesticide sector. In Germany, the annual costs of biodiversity loss due to intensive agriculture alone was pegged at €50 billion²⁵. In France, the societal costs of pesticide use represented more than 10% of the 2017 annual budget of the French Ministry of Food and Agriculture²⁶. According to these studies, failing to tackle health impacts, environmental degradation and the decline of pollinators and other insects, far outweigh any predicted costs related to pesticide reduction.
- ✦ **Extra costs for farmers:** Prices of external inputs, including pesticides, have been rising for the past two decades. Studies show a significant increase of farmers input spending per hectare in almost all major EU countries, with this increase far exceeded the yield increases achieved in the same period²⁷. The economic efficiency for farmers dwindles for every euro they spend on inputs like pesticides. The more they use these products, the further their income decreases.



- ◆ **Declining health:** Pesticide use has a severe impact on the health of farmers and other citizens living near agricultural areas²⁸. Pesticide exposure has been linked to increased risks of several illnesses, including different forms of cancer, cardiovascular diseases, and neurological disorders such as Parkinson and Alzheimer.

The example of the pesticide law lobbying shows that what the industry and big agri lobbies are truly defending is a broken food system that locks farmers in unsustainable practices. By prioritising short-term corporate profits over sustainable farming, the EU is failing its citizens, farmers and future generations who will continue to pay the price of pesticide use.

A MISLEADING "FOOD SECURITY" NARRATIVE



The claim that we need to produce more food is a standard argument used by the agroindustry, despite having been debunked over and over again. We already produce more than enough food worldwide to feed everyone, and to feed even higher population. Studies show that it is possible to feed Europe without synthetic pesticides²⁹. Pesticide reduction does not threaten food availability and access - but continuing the status quo will.

We address misleading food security claims and other arguments used by the agroindustry in our briefing "Tackling toxic myths on pesticides: why pesticides are not the answer to food security"³⁰.

TOWARDS A TOXIC FREE POLITICS

The pesticide law is not the only regulation that was derailed by the agroindustry. So far there has been no real progress towards the implementation of the Green Deal when it comes to food and farming. The influence of the agroindustry across trade associations, advisory media platforms, academia, EU institutions and governments, only serves to preserve the status quo, enabling them to continue making profits at the expense of farmers, citizens and the planet.

It is time for the EU institutions and other public authorities to stop giving legitimacy and providing such privileged access to industries that are known for their harmful practices. In the short term, we need a firewall between decision makers and the representatives of the biggest toxic companies. Like the tobacco industry lobby which has to some extent been sidelined from decision making in the last two decades, it is urgent to start limiting the power of big toxic polluters. Priority should be the protection of citizens and environment, not the profits of the pesticide industry. It's time to call for Toxic Free Politics.

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Friends of the Earth Europe campaigns for environmentally sustainable and socially just societies, unites more than 30 national organisations with thousands of local groups, and is part of the world's largest grassroots environmental network, Friends of the Earth International.

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