

Agricultural Justice, Age of Organics, and Alligators

Call to the Conference

There is no more important time than now in the course of modern history to rally a cross section of societal interests for a clearer and more forceful nationwide commitment to protect health and the environment from toxic chemicals –with leadership from farmworkers, consumers, farmers, conservationists, and scientists. Key foundational principles and values are emerging that embrace ethical standards for a healthy and sustainable environment and workplace that is socially just, as the threat from toxic chemical-intensive practices and products and the cost-effectiveness of alternatives come into sharper focus on a daily basis.

We are seeing greater scientific and public understanding that calls for bold action for a broader and deeper shift away from pesticides, previously viewed as a necessary tool in food production and land and building management. Organic systems with clear definitions and allowable practices, transparent and accountable to public oversight, are in high demand in the management of farmland and the places where we live, work, and play. But, workers and consumers must keep corporate interests in alignment with the organic ethic and clear protective standards.

The urgency for an expedited transition to sustainable and organic systems is necessitated by the hazards associated with pesticides and other synthetic fossil fuel based inputs –given their adverse impacts on complex biological systems, ecological balance, and the web of life. The rationale for toxic pesticide use has reached a higher level of scrutiny as the effectiveness of pesticides has been called into question by evidence that weeds and insects are exhibiting unprecedented levels of resistance to the chemicals.

Last month, the most widely used weedkiller in agriculture and home and garden use, glyphosate (Roundup), touted as a safe pesticide, was ranked by the International Agency for Research on Cancer/World Health Organization as a cancer causing substance based on animal studies used to determine effects in humans. Monsanto, the product's manufacturer, is pushing back, challenging independent science with industry science. Similarly, the body of scientific literature on declining pollinator health, including bees, butterflies, and birds, is criticized by manufacturers of bee-toxic pesticides. The preponderance of independent science puts neonicotinoid pesticides in the forefront as a contributor to pollinator decline, given that they are highly toxic, persistent, and systemic (moving through the entire plant and turning pollen and nectar poisonous). Those first in the line of exposure, farmworkers and farmers, are not adequately protected by federal and state regulatory standards and exposed to the most highly neurotoxic pesticides no longer used in residential areas, and putting farmworker children at elevated risk.

The studies in Lake Apopka, Florida over a decade ago that identified endocrine disrupting effects of chemicals in alligators, opened up areas of scientific understanding and uncovered deep deficiencies in the regulatory assessment of pesticides. Contaminated farmland in the area resulted in high toxic chemical exposure for farmworkers. Thank you for joining us at the Forum. We look forward to sharpening our understanding of relevant science and policy as we improve our effectiveness as agents for change.



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