

Eco-warriors battle glyphosate in Argentine countryside

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A soybean field is fumigated near Urdinarrain, Entre Rios province, Argentina

"They can't spray!" screamed Sofia Gatica, waving her arms before police led her away from the soybean field, handcuffed for having illegally entered private property.

Gatica had been protesting against the use of a herbicide in the field in the village of Dique Chico, in Argentina's Cordoba province.

It's a place where local residents clash regularly with farmers over the spraying of glyphosate on [genetically modified crops](#).

Glyphosate is a herbicide developed by the controversial agrochemical company Monsanto—which ceased to exist last month after it was bought by Bayer—that has been described by the World Health Organization as "probably carcinogenic."

These genetically modified plantations first appeared in Argentina at the end of the 1990s in place of livestock.

At the end of June, 18 million hectares (44 million acres) had been planted, producing 35.8 million metric tons (39.4 million tons) and making Argentina the third biggest such producer in the world behind the United States and Brazil.

But millions of liters of glyphosate are poured onto those plantations.

Pressured by [local residents](#), and without specific legislation, village mayors have delivered their own regulations to control the spraying, as much to limit their scope as to control the amount of toxins in herbicides.

But those regulations have been appealed by farmers, occasionally successfully, thus fueling the conflict.

"On the one hand there are constitutional rights, like the right to engage in legal industry, which is what the agricultural producer usually argues. But on the other side, there are other rights: to live in a healthy environment, the right to good health and life," said environmental

attorney Dario Avila.

"In terms of pesticides in Argentina, there are no national laws that apply to the whole country. These rules are reserved for the provincial governments."

'My children die'

As for Gatica, she bears a heavy cross.

"I entered a property to stop the spraying which enters homes without permission," she said.



Argentine environmentalist Sofia Gatica poses with a glove reading "Monsanto

out," as she protests against the use of the herbicide glyphosate

"They (pesticides) can enter our homes without permission and we have to ask their permission not to kill us.

"Their spray comes into my house, into my garden, dries up my garden, contaminates it and my children die," added Gatica, who lives in the neighboring village of Anisacate and several years ago suffered the death of a three-month old baby, born with a congenital disorder.

According to neonatologist Medardo Avila, from the Doctors of Fumigated Villages Network, since the use of glyphosate in Argentina began there has been an increase in cancer and birth defects amongst rural populations.

"What we doctors are seeing is that people are becoming sick in a different way," he said.

"They're mostly dying of cancer now, since the use of spraying and the mass use of pesticides.

"Clearly, rural populations in Argentina have a cancer rate three times higher than those in the cities," stated Avila, adding that for every 100 births in the countryside six babies have defects compared to two percent in other areas.

'Eco-terrorists'

However, the farmers are fighting back and Alejandro Dalmasso, who produces soybeans in Dique Chico, brands the health activists as criminals.

"We're adhering to the right agricultural practices. We fulfil whatever standards there are," he said.

"These groups are all over Argentina, they feed off causing damage to this country. We call them eco-terrorists.

"There's no serious scientific evidence to support their claims. That product was developed to be used in agriculture, there's no other use."

But for Fabian Tomasi, a 53-year-old suffering from severe toxic polyneuropathy (a disease affecting the nervous system) who used to work in the supply of herbicides for fumigation planes, the outlook is bleak.

He's suffering from loss of muscle mass and joint pain making it difficult to move and believes that glyphosate is "tremendously deceptive, a trap set by powerful people."

"There will be no-one left," he said. "All the land that we have won't be enough to bury so many dead."

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