

NGOs AND TRADE UNIONS DEMAND THE END OF EU'S PRODUCTION, EXPORT, AND IMPORT OF BANNED PESTICIDES

The EU has banned the use of a number of pesticides found to do serious damage to human health and the environment. However, companies remain free to manufacture these hazardous pesticides in the EU for export to other countries with weaker regulations, putting human health and the environment at risk. The EU also allows the import of food and agricultural goods grown with pesticides banned on its own fields, exposing European consumers to cocktails of dangerous residues and creating unfair competition for European farmers.

Over the past years, EU institutions have all recognised that there is a double standard here, which is problematic and should end. If the EU bans the use of certain pesticides because they are proven to be too dangerous for Europeans, it should not allow companies to keep manufacturing them for export, nor should it accept the import of food produced and contaminated with these substances.

Toxic trade: the EU's pesticide exports proven too dangerous for use on its own fields

- ▲ Loopholes in EU law mean chemical companies like Bayer and Syngenta can continue producing pesticides in the EU for export long after they have been banned from use to protect the environment or the health of its citizens.
- ▲ In 2022, the EU allowed the export of more than 120,000 tonnes of pesticides that are banned on European farms because of the dangers they pose to human health and nature.
- ▲ This is a 50% rise compared to the amount of banned pesticides notified for export from the EU in 2018. This is despite the fact that the UK, which has since left the EU, accounted for 40% of the exports. Taking this into account, the export of banned pesticides from the EU increased by 175% between 2018 and 2022.
- ▲ In total, more than 50 different pesticide active substances banned to protect human health or the environment were exported from the EU in 2022.
- ▲ 1,3-Dichloropropene (1,3-D), a soil fumigant classified as a likely carcinogen, was the largest export. It was banned in the EU because of concerns about risks to wildlife and groundwater.
- ▲ The second largest export was cyanamide, a plant growth regulator suspected of causing cancer and damaging fertility, which was banned because of "clear indications" that it has harmful effects on human health and in particular on operators.
- ▲ Some of the largest and most hazardous exports also included:
 - › Bee-killing neonicotinoid insecticides, which have been identified as a key factor in the decline of bees and other pollinators worldwide;
 - › Mancozeb, a fungicide banned in 2020 after it was found to be toxic to reproduction and an endocrine disruptor;
 - › Diquat, an acutely toxic herbicide, which was recently found to be involved in farmers' poisonings in Brazil;
 - › Chlorpyrifos, a banned pesticide linked to brain damage in children;
 - › Chlorothalonil, a chemical banned because of its potential to contaminate groundwater and cause cancer.
- ▲ As emphasised by the then Commissioner for Environment, Virginijus Sinkevičius, these chemicals, "can cause the same harm to health and the environment regardless of where they are being used".
- ▲ In fact, the overwhelming bulk of the EU's banned pesticide exports were destined for low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) such as Morocco, South Africa, India, Mexico, Vietnam, Peru, the Philippines, or Brazil, where the risk of human and environmental exposure is, "almost without exception", much higher than in the EU, as UN agencies have warned. In these countries, dangerous pesticides banned in the EU will have devastating impacts on both human health and the environment.
- ▲ A statement by 35 United Nations Human Rights Council experts in July 2020 highlighted "the practice of wealthy States exporting their banned toxic chemicals to poorer nations lacking the capacity to control the risks is deplorable and must end". The experts warned that the "health and environmental impacts" are externalised "on the most vulnerable", especially "communities of African descent and other people of colour".

As shown in a recent investigation in France, this toxic trade does not only have adverse effects in importing countries. It also has serious consequences for the environment and communities living around factories that keep producing these hazardous chemicals in Europe. For instance, the water around a BASF factory in France was found to be polluted with residues of fipronil at levels 336 times higher than the threshold considered safe for the environment. Fipronil has been banned in France since 2004 but BASF keeps producing it in its factory from Seine-Maritime.

Banned pesticides on our dinner plates

- ▲ The EU also allows the import of food and agricultural goods grown with pesticides that have been banned on its own fields. This creates unfair competition for EU farmers who are – rightfully – no longer allowed to use these chemicals, but are confronted with imported products grown in much laxer conditions. It also raises concerns for the health of European consumers, who end up being exposed to residues of hazardous pesticides banned in the EU on their dinner plates and daily beverages.
- ▲ Due to loopholes in EU pesticide policies, about 65 EU-banned pesticides currently have a maximum residue level (upper legal level for a pesticide residue in food that is considered safe for consumers) that is above zero (i.e. above the established limit of detection). This means residues of these dangerous pesticides banned in Europe are still legally permitted in food imports. As a result, the EU effectively allows their use in traded products.
- ▲ In 2022, a total of 53 different EU-banned pesticides were detected in food imports from third countries. Items with higher contaminated rates were tea (42%), coffee (25.6%), legumes (16.6%), and spices (15.8%).
- ▲ Among the most frequently detected chemicals were imidacloprid, thiamethoxam, and clothianidin. These three bee-killing and neurotoxic neonicotinoid insecticides were detected in nearly 500 samples of imported food analysed by EU authorities in 2022. Carbendazim, a fungicide classified as mutagenic and toxic for reproduction, was also one of the most frequently detected banned pesticides in imported food that year.
- ▲ Ironically, these four banned pesticides, which were the most frequently detected as residues in imported foods in 2022, have also been exported by the EU that same year. Like a boomerang, these banned pesticides made in the EU find their way back to Europe via imported foods.
- ▲ The imported foods most often found to contain residues of pesticides banned in the EU came from India,

Uganda, China, Kenya, Brazil, Egypt, Vietnam, Thailand, Costa Rica, South Africa, Morocco, Peru, and Turkey. These LMICs were all part of the destinations to which the EU exported banned pesticides in 2022.

- ▲ According to Sue Longley, General Secretary of the International Union of Food and Agricultural Workers (IUF) “it is of great concern that farmworkers in the countries where the fruits and vegetables are grown are still having to work with these pesticides and risking their health, and even their life, to do so”.

Commitments unfulfilled

- ▲ The European Commission (EC) had committed in 2020 that the EU will “lead by example, and, in line with international commitments, ensure that hazardous chemicals banned in the European Union are not produced for export, including by amending relevant legislation if and as needed.” The Commission had announced that it would come up with a legislative proposal by 2023.
- ▲ The commitment of the European Commission to prohibit the export of hazardous chemicals banned in the EU was welcomed by hundreds of civil society organisations in a joint statement. In addition, almost 70 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) wrote to the President of the Commission, welcoming its promise to end this practice, while stressing that “concrete actions are urgently needed”. The initiative was expressly welcomed by the European Council in March 2021.
- ▲ However, while the Commission has conducted some preparatory work, organised a public consultation and commissioned an impact assessment, its commitment to produce a legislative proposal by 2023 remains unfulfilled, leaving manufacturers free to keep producing and exporting growing quantities of banned pesticides every year from the EU.
- ▲ In June 2024, the European Council stressed that “the Commission has not fully delivered on the Chemicals Strategy [...] addressing emerging chemical risks and emerging health and environmental concerns and prohibiting the production for export of harmful chemicals not allowed in the EU” and urged the Commission “to keep a high level of ambition in the implementation of the strategy”. A petition with currently over 300,000 signatures, demanding that the EU stops exporting banned chemicals, was also delivered to the European Commissioner for Environment.
- ▲ In the meantime, some Member States have taken the lead. France adopted a landmark legislation prohibiting the export of banned pesticides which entered into force in 2022. Belgium adopted a similar legislation which is expected to enter into effect in May 2025. However, these legislations vary in their

scope and have their loopholes. Also, by their very nature, these national measures may be circumvented by large agrochemical companies which have factories and subsidiaries across Europe.

- ▲ The EC had also acknowledged that the importation of foods treated with pesticides banned in the EU contradicts "consumer expectations", and negatively affects the "competitiveness of EU agriculture" as well as the populations and the environment of the countries where the foods are produced.
- ▲ Following the evaluation of the Pesticides and MRL Regulation, the European Commission promised in its report to the European Parliament and the Council to address some of the loopholes in EU law which allow residues of banned pesticides in food imports. In particular, the Commission said it would take into account "environmental aspects" when assessing requests for so-called import tolerances. The Commission also committed to review import tolerances "for substances meeting a high level of risk for human health".
- ▲ In 2023, the Commission did move forward and decided to lower the MRLs of two neonicotinoid pesticides, clothianidin and thiamethoxam, that were banned for environmental reasons, i.e unacceptable risks for bees. However, residues of many other pesticides banned for environmental reasons are still allowed in food imports. At the same time, the Commission still proposes to allow food imports containing residues of pesticides that are banned to protect human health.

Double standards: time to deliver!

- ▲ The European Commission must now deliver on its commitment to end double standards in pesticide trade! It must come with a legislative proposal to prohibit the export of all pesticides that are banned in the EU to protect human health and the environment, and take action to ban the import of foods made with these chemicals.
- ▲ The conclusions of the Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture – launched in January 2024 by EC President Ursula von der Leyen, and which brought together stakeholders from the European agri-food sectors, civil society, farmers' organisations, rural communities, and academia – support a ban on the "exports within the EU banned hazardous pesticides to countries with less stringent regulations" as well as "a stronger alignment of imports with EU food and farming standards".
- ▲ In its Vision for Agriculture and Food published on the 19th of February 2025, the Commission committed to take action to ensure "that the most hazardous

pesticides banned in the EU for health and environmental reasons are not allowed back to the EU through imported products" as well as towards "the issue of the export of hazardous chemicals, including pesticides, that are banned in the EU".

- ▲ In December 2024, Austria, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden joined a letter from Denmark to the new Commissioner for Environment, Jessika Roswall, recalling that the Commission had "not fully delivered on the Chemicals Strategy" and calling "to end export of hazardous chemicals that are banned in the European Union".
- ▲ During the Environment Council meeting, Danish Minister Magnus Heunicke declared that: "I believe we have a moral and we have an ethical responsibility to protect citizens' health and the environment, not only in the EU but also outside the Union. It is simply not right to export chemicals to third countries that we have assessed to be too dangerous to our own citizens. No one can justify this. It has to come to an end."
- ▲ In January 2025, Luxembourg's Agriculture Minister, Martine Hansen, backed by six other countries including France and Spain, said it will push to end import tolerances for pesticides banned in the EU, according to a note seen by Politico. "If they're too dangerous for Europe, they shouldn't show up in imports either." The new Agriculture Commissioner, Christophe Hansen, also recently called for a clamp-down on pesticide residues in imported foods.
- ▲ As shown by the example of France and a study from Le Basic published in April 2024, a ban on the export of banned pesticides would neither endanger employment nor burden the economy in Europe, contrary to what the pesticide lobby argues. At the same time, stopping the export of EU-banned pesticides would have a strong and positive impact on people's health and the environment in importing countries.
- ▲ A ban on these exports would also be in compliance with World Trade Organization (WTO) rules, as shown in a recently published legal opinion written by Andrea Hamann, Law Professor of the University of Strasbourg.
- ▲ We call on the European Commission with the utmost urgency to uphold its commitment and ensure, without further delay, that all pesticides which have been banned in the EU to protect human health and the environment are also prohibited from being manufactured and exported, and that residues of these toxic chemicals are not allowed in food imports. There is overwhelming support for this!

Additional measures to support a global transition

A prohibition on the export and import of banned pesticides is an important first step, but it must be complemented by other measures:

- ▲ We call on the European Commission to implement its commitment to “engage actively” with trading partners, especially with developing countries, “to accompany the transition towards the more sustainable use of pesticides to avoid disruptions in trade and promote alternative plant protection products and methods”. Farmers in low-and-middle income countries must be supported in their transition away from hazardous chemicals, and towards safe and sustainable alternatives, especially Integrated Pest Management, Integrated Weed Management, agroforestry, and agroecology, to ensure they are not subject to a higher risk of crop losses and are not forced to buy hazardous chemicals from somewhere else.
- ▲ In addition, we call on the European Commission to make sure that the sale of pesticides is fully covered under the scope of the Directive on corporate sustainability due diligence. European manufacturers that make huge profits from the sale of hazardous, banned chemicals in low- and middle-income countries also produce a vast amount of those products outside of Europe, the sales of which will remain unaffected by an export ban in the EU.

- ▲ We also call on the European Commission to implement the EU's commitment to “use all its diplomacy, trade policy and development support instruments” to promote the “phasing out” of the use of pesticides no longer approved in the EU and “to promote low-risk substances and alternatives to pesticides globally”. This could be achieved by engaging in the internationally agreed, and soon established, Global Alliance on Highly Hazardous Pesticides, which has the objective of phasing out highly hazardous pesticides in agriculture and promoting a transition to safer alternatives.
- ▲ Furthermore, we call upon the EU to do everything in its power to contribute to a more efficient functioning of the International Rotterdam Convention. The Convention currently suffers from “a paralysis”, because a handful of countries are persistently blocking the listing of new hazardous chemicals, “despite the desire and efforts of the majority of the Parties to strengthen the Rotterdam Convention.”

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