

## Environmental Racism?: Pesticide banned in UK and EU shipped in vast quantities to Costa Rica.

By ENCA secretary Sheila Amoo-Gottfried

Sheila has summarised the results of an investigation made largely by Greenpeace and Public Eye into what she calls 'environmental racism' by European agri-business transnational companies like Syngenta which have been sending fungicides that are banned here in Europe to countries of the Global South such as Costa Rica in this case.

Cipreses, a town on the fertile slopes of the Irazú volcano, north of San José, traditionally held ceremonies at the Plantón spring, praying for rain for the crops. Nine years ago, Isabel Méndez noticed a strong pesticide smell at the spring. She raised her concerns to ASADA (the local water administrative association), but these were brushed off.

Chlorothalonil, the chemical used widely as a fungicide is banned as a potential carcinogen in the UK and EU and yet is shipped in large quantities to Costa Rica, and other countries in the Global South, by European companies like Syngenta.

Méndez, determined to fight for her community, partnered with Ricardo Rivera, a former ASADA administrator, and other concerned residents to form EcoCipreses. Noticing that many people were getting sick in such a small place, samples were sent for testing and scientists confirmed the water springs were contaminated in Cipreses and the neighbouring town of Santa Rosa. EcoCipreses advocacy led to national calls for a ban on Chlorothalonil, following these scientific reports. The government issued instructions not to drink tap water, and since then trucks have been rolling in to deliver drinking water to the affected communities.

"For nine years now", says Méndez, "I've been fighting with other women in Cipreses to get Chlorothalonil banned, and we are making progress on what used to feel impossible: Costa Rica's Constitutional Court has given the Executive Branch of Government a deadline of six months to issue a ban."

This ruling came into force in June 2023, but Isabel Méndez is well aware that Costa Rica's complex decision-making system which requires relevant government ministries to all agree to the ban, along with the strong lobbying pressure coming from the agrochemical industry, could seriously delay definitive action.



In the meantime, to keep the pressure up, she has launched an online petition, gathering more than 52,500 signatures to put pressure on government ministers. "These last years have been very tough on my community. Besides never having enough water, my daughter, Fiorella, had polyps at 16 and has now, at 23, lost her sense of smell and taste. One of my neighbours has tongue cancer and several young people have been diagnosed with stomach cancer. It's alarming.... To make matters worse, some locals with the support of the pesticide lobby regularly harass, intimidate and threaten us with death because of our activism."

EcoCipreses has concerns about the broader health and environmental impact on the whole region, which

produces 80 per cent of Costa Rica's vegetables, using similar quantities of fungicides, vastly exceeding safe consumption limits. The solutions are not easy. No-one knows how long people have been drinking contaminated water or what the effects on their health will be. No one knows how widespread the contamination is across the country or how the pesticide traces can be removed from the springs already found to be tainted.

So, Isabel Méndez and her colleagues are determined to maintain maximum pressure. "As hard as it is, as hard as it's been, we won't give up because it isn't just Cipreses' and Santa Rosa's springs ... there could be plenty more.

**We feel we can't let Syngenta use countries like ours – from Latin America to Africa – as dumping grounds for chemicals they can't sell legally in Europe."**

### Sources

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- Euronews, 26 June 2023, 'The EU and UK exported 1,000 tonnes of a banned pesticide to poorer countries, investigation reveals', *Euronews*.
- Vinicio Chacón, 20 septiembre 2023, 'Más de 52 mil personas piden prohibición de Clorotalonil', *Semanario Universidad*.
- Eko, 16 August 2023, Online petition: 'EU: stop spreading banned chemicals'.

## FECON Report from Costa Rica: Tourism and Private Development encroach on Public Land and Local Livelihoods on the Guanacaste Coast

In 2022 FECON – Federación Costarricense para la Conservación del Ambiente – contacted ENCA with a funding proposal for a project on the Guanacaste coast of Costa Rica. FECON are a national network for Costa Rican environmental groups and report on issues from Agribusiness to Eco-feminism. ENCA was able to support them with a \$2,000 grant towards the project. FECON have now reported back on how that money was spent – an impressive small budget project with far reaching implications. For the newsletter, their report was translated and summarised by ENCA member James Watson. August 2023



*“Through approaching the communities, we hope the people will identify the most important territorial*

*elements or spaces for their existence as a community, for which it is worth participating and mobilising socially in the organising processes developed by the Municipality” (FECON 2023 Report)*

Guanacaste is a province of north-west Costa Rica with an extensive coastline popular with tourists. FECON’s proposal highlighted the pressures that tourism development has put on the local community and environment. Regional leaders had come to them with concerns that tourism and private interests were obtaining development permits on supposedly public-access land, in processes that apparently use wealth to exclude and marginalise locals. They were particularly concerned about loss of access to and eviction from homes on coastal land. They state that tourism has displaced all other forms of economic activity – with traditional fishermen being pushed out while sport fishing and the marina booms. Forest, water resources, and local fauna including breeding sea turtles are also threatened by the unregulated spread.

FECON asked for US\$2,000 to support an information gathering ‘Diagnóstico’ project to engage with local communities, gather their concerns, and systematise them in documents that might kick-start their struggle. ENCA was happy to be able to send this money over in late 2022 and FECON have recently sent back a full report on how the money was spent.

FECON’s work with this little parcel of money has been impressive. Their report is an excellent example of high-quality

local work to build a firm foundation for a long-term campaign that empowers people otherwise excluded from development processes – at all levels from local to national.

Through four trips to the area, FECON have strengthened community connections with multiple face to face meetings and a Facebook presence. They started a media campaign ‘Playas de Guanacaste - Recuperemos la Zona Pública’ and were featured on La Voz de Guanacaste radio as part of a series on gentrification. They have built a local network of contacts affected by the issues, who via FECON now have a bigger platform on which to stand and advocate for their land.

FECON’s report shows an impressive commitment to systematic research and data gathering. They formalised an interview guide to systematically gather data from key people in the area. Visits were made to the coast and ground observations and satellite images used to estimate the encroachment of development on publicly accessible land.

FECON’s members include lecturers and sociologists with connections to Costa Rica’s National University (UNA) and the Technological Institute of Costa Rica where Tourism Management students have been given lectures on the Guanacaste story.

FECON have worked to link the local struggle to national level advocacy. They state that the local government of Santa Cruz has failed to carry out its responsibilities delimiting and protecting public land. In response to this FECON’s representatives have made a complaint against Santa Cruz to the Costa Rican Attorney General.

As FECON generates more local data and connections, they are putting themselves in an excellent position to continue this advocacy work in to the future, hopefully rebalancing the relationship between local less well-off community members and more wealthy, often external private interests and giving a voice to the easily marginalised for whom Guanacaste is both their home and source of livelihood.

