Frequently Asked Questions about the Center for Media & Democracy Claims Against Syngenta

Why did Syngenta try to keep its communications and public relations plans secret?

It didn't. Most of the documents posted by the Center for Media and Democracy on SourceWatch.org were originally filed with the Court under seal by plaintiffs' counsel, not by Syngenta.

Many of the documents posted were not originally created by Syngenta. They came from third parties subpoenaed by the plaintiffs' attorneys.

Why did Syngenta hire so many experts?

Syngenta has always encouraged independent review by scientific experts. The company has worked with a number of well-respected organizations and researchers for many years to investigate atrazine and its safety. The trial lawyers and activists who attack atrazine also routinely engage experts to support their positions.

Why did Syngenta hire PR firms and pay other experts to say good things about atrazine? Was it to influence EPA and the public?

For many years Syngenta has supported a number of well-respected organizations, researchers and experts, some of which have investigated atrazine or made comments about its safety, effectiveness, and environmental and economic benefits. Syngenta has also sought the counsel of communications experts to help it effectively communicate facts about atrazine in an environment where misinformation is often spread by activists and trial lawyers. The trial lawyers and activists who attack atrazine also routinely engage PR firms and other experts to support their positions. We will continue to defend atrazine by presenting the facts about this trusted herbicide and urging others to do so as well.

Why did Syngenta pay Richard Fawcett more than $30 million?

It didn't. Over the past 17 years, Syngenta has paid Dr. Fawcett, an agronomist and recognized expert in crop and weed management, a total of about $580,000 — less than 2 percent of what the Center for Media and Democracy claims he received.

Much of Dr. Fawcett's time has been spent researching and developing best management practices to reduce the loss of sediment, pesticides and nutrients to surface and ground water, and to conduct training for farmers encouraging adoption of these practices.

Why was atrazine banned in Europe?

Despite the claims of activists, this simply is not true. In fact, millions of European farmers continue to rely on an herbicide very similar to atrazine. After examining atrazine for the EU, the UK Scientific Committee on Plants found, “that the use of atrazine, consistent with good plant protection practice, will not have any harmful effects on human or animal health or any unacceptable effects on the environment.”

How do you respond to lawsuits filed by community water systems regarding atrazine?

They are completely without merit. Depositions given by representatives of several of the community water systems show clearly that many have never detected unsafe levels of atrazine. These water systems continue to certify to their customers that their water meets or exceeds government safety standards and poses no health or safety risk. They admit in their sworn testimony they use carbon filtration to address issues related to the taste and odor of finished drinking water, not to filter atrazine. Several have admitted under oath they had never heard of atrazine until they were approached by trial attorneys looking to sign up plaintiffs for the lawsuits.

Why is EPA not doing more to address atrazine in the environment?

The EPA is evaluating the latest scientific evidence as part of its normal procedure to verify the safety of atrazine and protect public health and the environment. Over the past three years, the EPA has convened five Scientific Advisory Panels. The most recent was July 2011. EPA has found repeatedly atrazine can be safely used. Each additional review should increase the confidence that regulators and the public have in its safety.

How can you be sure that atrazine is safe?

Atrazine is one of the most carefully studied and thoroughly tested chemicals in the world. More than 6,000 scientific studies conducted over the past 50 years have clearly established the safety of atrazine.

After a thorough review of the available scientific evidence, the World Health Organization in 2010 reviewed its scientific assessment of atrazine’s safety and raised its recommended acceptable atrazine exposure level from 2 parts per billion (ppb) to 100 ppb.

The safety of atrazine was also reaffirmed in a 2011 report on the latest findings from the Agricultural Health Study, an ongoing epidemiological study of more than 89,000 participants sponsored by the EPA, the National Cancer Institute, and the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences.

How do you respond to the studies that activists use to claim atrazine is harmful?

Many of the studies cited by the activists, including research by Dr. Paul Winchester, Dr. Suzanne Fenton and Dr. Tyrone Hayes, have been questioned and dismissed by respected scientific experts, including the EPA, Health Canada and the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority.

Dr. Hayes refuses to allow government authorities and independent experts to review the data from his studies, and nobody else has been able to replicate his results. And a recent study by Dr. Lori Cragin, the author herself makes it clear her results were preliminary, with low participation rates and insufficient statistical power.

Does atrazine affect reproductive health?

Not at levels to which anyone could be exposed in the environment. An EPA Scientific Advisory Panel meeting in July 2011 reaffirmed earlier EPA findings that atrazine does not affect reproductive or developmental outcomes, even at levels much higher than would ever be found in the environment. The panel also found that children and developing infants are no more susceptible to atrazine than adults.

Many other independent organizations continue to support the safety of atrazine, including the World Health Organization, which last year raised its recommended acceptable atrazine exposure level from 2 parts per billion (ppb) up to 100 ppb — a 50-fold increase.

What about reports that atrazine harms frogs?

In April 2010, the EPA reiterated that "…atrazine does not adversely affect amphibian gonadal development based on a review of laboratory and field studies...no additional testing is warranted to address this issue."

Independent researchers and government authorities, including EPA, Health Canada and the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority have reviewed many of the studies on which the activists' claims are based and found them to be inconclusive, of weak design or having produced inconsistent results.

In fact, the native northern leopard frog continues to thrive in areas where atrazine is heavily used, including in irrigation ditches next to corn fields in the Midwest. Atrazine and similar products are critical modern agricultural tools that support land and water conservation, helping to protect habitats for frogs and other wildlife.

What about the claims of people living near Triangle Lake in Oregon?

Concerns about the spraying of herbicides on forests in Oregon are not based on valid data or sound scientific analysis. Scientific studies have shown repeatedly that it is physically impossible for levels of atrazine in the environment to reach concentrations high enough to have any adverse effect on humans. Given the chemical properties of atrazine and the way it is metabolized in the human body, the levels allegedly found in the urine of people living near Triangle Lake could not possibly have come from exposure in the natural environment.