



Decades of Deceit – A Critical Eye on Pesticides, Science and Industry

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Investigative journalist Carey Gillam has covered corporate and political news, including 17 years as a senior correspondent for Reuters. In 2018 her book “Whitewash – The Story of a Weed Killer, Cancer and the Corruption of Science” won the Rachel Carson Book Award from the Society of Environmental Journalists and a gold medal for Outstanding Book of the Year from the Independent Book Publishers. Gillam is now research director for U.S. Right to Know. Her keynote speech at the 2019 Common Ground Country Fair appears below, edited for length, and is posted on **MOFGA’s YouTube channel**.



Carey Gillam. English photo

I’ve been a journalist for more than 30 years. I spent most of my career with Reuters International News Agency covering floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, riots, shootings. But most of my time, especially over the last 20 years, I’ve spent with farmers. I’ve also spent a lot of time with Monsanto – with people in its laboratories, their top executives – and with their rivals, Syngenta, Dow, Dupont. I’ve spent time with plant scientists, soil scientists, weed scientists. I’ve engaged with regulators at the USDA, FDA and EPA.

This journey has led me to a profound sense of dread. We have created a huge problem for future generations – a pesticide dependent food production system created by a handful of powerful corporations that say we shouldn’t worry about the risks that come with these pesticides. They’re needed to feed the world. We should focus on the rewards. They’ve convinced policy makers to focus on those rewards and on profits rather than protection of public health. That’s what I write about in “Whitewash.” It’s not anecdotal or opinion; it’s what data and documents show.

Health experts worldwide tell us that pesticides are related to a lot of problems – to neurodevelopmental problems in children, kidney and liver diseases, cancers. We see that in the science. We’ve lost a much-needed sense of caution around these chemicals, though. We’re becoming complacent – maybe not in Maine, maybe not here today, but in our larger population, in our conventional food system.



Gillam (left) with Sarah Alexander, MOFGA’s executive director. English photo

Rachel Carson said, "If we are going to live so intimately with these chemicals, eating and drinking them, taking them into the very marrow of our bones, we had better know something about their nature and their power." At the time, people listened. We saw development of the EPA because of her work, to a degree, and because of information she brought to light about the risks of pesticides. A lot of environmental defense organizations were founded in the '60s and '70s. Now the pendulum seems to have swung the other way. Washington policies benefit corporations; regulations are slashed – clean water, pesticide regulations, testing protocols; things that benefit companies but not the environment or people.

Not-so-Fun Facts

Over a billion pounds of pesticides are used in the United States every year, and 5.6 billion pounds are used worldwide. The USDA estimates about 50 million Americans get their drinking water from sources contaminated with pesticides. Research ties these pesticides to an array of cancers and diseases, neurodevelopmental problems, reproductive and fertility issues. Cancers are on the rise. Thirty-nine percent of men and women in the United States right now are expected to get cancer in their lifetimes. That seems outrageous to me. That doesn't bode well for my children or yours. More than 600,000 people are expected to die this year from cancer in the United States. Nearly 1.6 million are expected to be newly diagnosed with cancers. And pediatric cancers are on the rise. In children under 5, rates are climbing for leukemia, brain tumors and rare liver tumors according to the National Cancer Institute.

Television ads by pharmaceutical companies tell us we should live with cancer, we should drug ourselves to feel better after cancer treatments, we can cut off a breast or a body part, we can live with radiation, we can live with cancer. It doesn't seem like the right message, but that's the message we're getting over and over.

The National Toxicology Program 2016 report said yes, cancers are on the rise. An array of factors can contribute to cancer in different individuals, but pesticides are one of them, and we can do something about pesticides: We could and should address environmental contaminants like pesticides. The USDA says 450 fungicides, insecticides and weed killers can be used routinely in growing foods, and they leave residues in our foods.

Scientific research ties the weed killer atrazine to birth defects and low fetal birth weight. Chlorpyrifos, an insecticide marketed by Dow Chemical, is so dangerous that it's been banned from household use for over a decade. It was supposed to be banned from agricultural use because the EPA said no amount is safe in food and water, and studies find it in our food and water. This insecticide has been shown to cause neurodevelopmental problems in children. It was supposed to be banned in 2017 from farm use. In 2017 we got a new president, Dow Chemical gave \$1 million to the Trump inaugural fund, its high-ranking people met with the Trump administration, and the ban on chlorpyrifos magically went away.

Glyphosate: The Poster Child

The poster child for this problem is glyphosate and Monsanto. Glyphosate is a weed killer and the active ingredient in Roundup, Ranger Pro other herbicides sold by Monsanto. Now because patents expired, it's sold by other companies around the world. Monsanto patented glyphosate in 1974. It was considered a novel herbicide because it worked so effectively and efficiently on an array of weeds. Monsanto said it was much safer than other herbicides, would not persist in the soil, would not be dangerous for people or pets, and was safe enough to drink according to some marketing literature. Monsanto has made billions of dollars. It's used on residential lawns and gardens, golf courses, public spaces, children's sports fields, around sidewalks and over forests. In Maine there's an effort to ban aerial spraying, but powerful companies are pushing back.

In farming it's sprayed on an array of crops genetically modified to tolerate it, like corn, soybeans, sugar beets, and alfalfa fed to livestock. It's also used on crops that aren't genetically modified – sprayed directly on wheat, oats, lentils, barley and other crops shortly before harvest because Monsanto markets it as a desiccant to dry the crop. To do that they had to get EPA to allow higher levels of this chemical in the food we consume. The EPA agreed, so it's in many food products now. It's also used in vineyards and orchards, in almond and avocado and watermelon growing. It is pervasive in food production today.

In the 1990s we used about 25 million pounds of glyphosate annually in the United States. Now it's close to 300 million pounds a year in the United States. Worldwide, about 125 million pounds in the '90s, to close to 2 billion pounds now. It is the most widely used herbicide in history. The U.S. Geological Survey finds it in soil, air and rainfall. Research ties it to cancer and many other problems, including non-Hodgkin lymphoma and acute myeloid leukemia. A University of Washington review of epidemiology found a 41 percent increased risk for non-Hodgkin lymphoma in people highly exposed to glyphosate.

Because this is so pervasive, you would think our FDA and USDA would do residue testing. For 30 years they have analyzed and reported on pesticide levels in foods, but for 30 years they've skipped glyphosate even though it's the most widely used pesticide and is sprayed directly on crops. The Government Accountability Office said in 2014 that they needed to test for it. USDA declined to do so. They still don't. FDA started in 2016 and put out one very limited report for corn, soy, milk and eggs. They said don't worry – it was in corn and soy but within legal limits. What they didn't say (which I found through Freedom of Information Act requests) was that they found glyphosate in a lot of other things. A chemist in Atlanta found very high levels in samples of honey sent to his lab from around the country – even in organic. We have no legal limit in the United

States, but Europe does. All the levels he found exceeded European limits. He told his FDA supervisor he was alarmed, and he was told not to worry. He then tested oatmeal samples and found high levels of glyphosate. The FDA reassigned him so that he's no longer testing foods for glyphosate.

Another FDA chemist brought food from home and couldn't find any except broccoli that didn't have glyphosate in it. None of this is in the public report.

In my book I write about EPA, FDA and USDA emails that are alarming because they don't match what you hear from the agencies and the companies publicly. Monsanto maintains that it's crazy to think that glyphosate causes cancer, and any scientist who said that is dead wrong. But in 1983 it submitted one of its own animal studies to the EPA. The EPA scientists said it looks like glyphosate causes cancer because mice that were dosed got rare tumors, and mice that weren't dosed, didn't. Monsanto said they were looking at it wrong; "let us tell you how to analyze it." They went round and round for five years. EPA eventually asked Monsanto to redo the study, but Monsanto refused. Eventually EPA managers overruled their own EPA scientists and classified glyphosate as not likely to cause cancer, which allowed its use to this degree. Corporate profits were prioritized over public health. One EPA scientist even said in an email to Monsanto that it's not my job to protect you; it's my job to protect the public.

Research since the '80s that tied glyphosate to cancer eventually was studied by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), part of the World Health Organization and made of independent scientists who analyze substances that are widely used and for which there is a suspicion that they may cause cancer. In March 2015 this group looked at toxicology, epidemiology and mechanistic data conducted on glyphosate and classified it as a probable human carcinogen. They found a specific association to non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

Monsanto set about to destroy the credibility of the scientists, but meanwhile people started filing lawsuits – people with non-Hodgkin lymphoma who had been spraying Roundup in shorts and sandals because they thought it was so safe. Now over 18,000 lawsuits allege that Monsanto knew about and hid the risks for years. There have been three trials so far, and juries have awarded over \$2 billion in damages – most in punitive damages because of the degree of conduct and the practices and tactics Monsanto's engaged in for decades. I call it "decades of deceit." You really see this in the discovery documents that Monsanto had to turn over – roughly 10 million pages. Most of them the company has argued to keep sealed, so the lawyers can see them but I can't and you can't. But several hundred have come out, and they show clearly that this company has worked hard for 40 years to hide the evidence, to harass scientists, to try to discredit me and other journalists and anyone who is trying to look at and talk about the science.

They have been ghostwriting scientific papers, including ones that regulators rely on – doing the writing but paying outside scientists to edit and sign their names so that it will appear to be independent of Monsanto. One writes to his colleagues that he's written a paper about the safety of GMOs for consumption by livestock, but he can't find a scientist willing to put his name on something they didn't write. It's not just scientific literature, but articles and op-eds. An academic was writing a lot in Forbes about the safety of GMOs and of glyphosate and how crazy these cancer scientists were. Monsanto's PR team wrote these pieces. They did this for articles on WebMD, for posts on Facebook and Twitter. They recruited mommy bloggers, nutritionists, dieticians. You also see the formation of front groups that Monsanto worked to fund. One is the American Council on Science and Health. Doesn't that sound legitimate? They publish a lot in USA Today. They are quoted as an authentic scientific organization, but Monsanto sends them money. If the information comes from a third party with an important name, like Academic Review or American Council on Science and Health or Genetic Literacy Project, these organizations and many more are funded and contracted by Monsanto and the agricultural industry to confuse and conceal the truth from farmers, consumers and policy makers.

Open records requests also show that many academics take funding and direction for their programs from Monsanto and other companies, and collaborate on PowerPoints about what they should say to students. They're signing policy letters written by Monsanto.

A professor from the University of Illinois who was going overseas to speak emailed Monsanto asking, "Where am I going, who am I speaking to and what am I talking about?" They give these people direction, call it third-party engagement, not only to promote their product but to try to discredit and harass. I knew I had been targeted for a long time, but I learned in August that they really didn't like this book, "Whitewash." They had a spreadsheet, a Carey Gilliam book action plan with 20 line items, a consulting company in Washington, D.C. Before the book came out, they talked about getting negative book reviews written by third parties, about manipulating Google searches so that if people type in my name and "glyphosate," they'll get Monsanto's view of the book. They talked about ways to take me down on social media. I've learned: Twitter is an ugly place.

Caitlin [Shetterly] had it done to her when her book "Modified" came out. They've been doing this for years to top-level scientist Linda Birnbaum, who has led our National Toxicology Program at our National Institutes of Environmental Health Sciences. Considered one of the top toxicologists in the world, she's been trying to say we are endangering future generations. The regulatory structure is not keeping up with the science that shows that pesticide levels considered safe for so long really aren't that safe, and our children are at risk. She's come under attack, been put under investigation, all of her emails were taken by members of Congress, the House Science, Space and Technology Committee, and a few Republicans led this assault against her. All she's trying to say is U.S. regulations have not kept pace with scientific advances showing that widely used chemicals cause serious health problems at levels previously assumed to be safe, and our children face the highest risk.

For me, that's what it's all about. I have three children, and our children are hurt by pesticide exposures. Pesticide exposures come directly into our home, in the food we put on our children's plates, in our water, and children are so vulnerable, especially their brain development. This world we've allowed these corporations to create is awash in pesticides. The American Academy of Pediatrics said the epidemiological evidence demonstrates an association between early life exposure to pesticides and pediatric cancers and decreased cognitive function. But our regulators aren't listening, because companies – especially Monsanto – continue to tell the EPA that we need higher levels of these pesticides to be considered legal in our food, and the EPA says OK.

I want my children to live long, healthy lives. I don't want them to be part of the 39 percent, but I don't think those odds are very good. I expect everybody here knows somebody who has cancer or has had cancer themselves. It's come really close to home for me. That's why I'm here.

Another quote from Rachel Carson: "If having endured much we have at last asserted our right to know, and if by knowing, we have concluded that we are being asked to take senseless and frightening risks, we should no longer accept the counsel of those who tell us that we must fill our world with poisonous chemicals. We should look about and see what other course is open to us."

That's what you're doing here today. I find that wonderful and amazing.

I left Reuters at the end of 2015. I work now for a little nonprofit, U.S. Right to Know. We spend almost all our time filing FOIA requests and working with journalists and others and policymakers to share information that could be relevant as they work on laws and regulations. U.S. Right to Know has been targeted and attacked. There are lovely internal documents from Monsanto about how to take us down, but we're still standing.

My book "Whitewash" is the story of real people. There's academic stuff in there, a lot of science and documents, but I've got a lot of real people, farmers and their families, scientists who've been silenced, who have had to leave FDA or USDA because their science is being suppressed. Monsanto filed documents in court in the Roundup litigation to keep my book from being introduced as evidence.

We are putting our health and our environment in danger when we allow these companies to control Washington, to control public policy, to control what's in our food and what we feed our children. The future of our children is in danger. The big chemical companies tell us not to worry as they count their profits. But we should care, we should worry; we should try to do something to change that course. This is not a feel-good story, but it's one that has to be told.