

Banned in Europe: How the EU exports pesticides too dangerous for use in Europe

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Pesticides

Syngenta

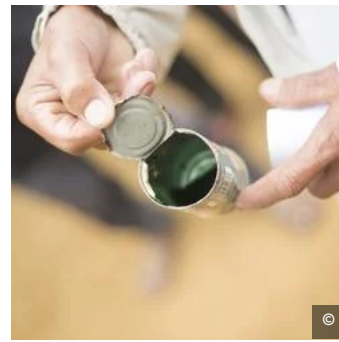
Paraquat



Public Eye and Unearthed reveal for the first time the extent to which the European Union (EU) allows the export of certain pesticides even though it bans their use on its own fields. Our investigation shows the hypocrisy of allowing agrochemical companies to flood low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) with substances deemed too dangerous for European agriculture. The Basel-based giant Syngenta plays a leading role.

Syngenta's best-selling pesticide, **paraquat**, is so dangerous that just one sip can be lethal. Chronic exposure, even at low doses, can cause Parkinson's disease. The deadly pesticide was first marketed in 1962, but has been banned in the European Union (EU) since 2007, as well as in Switzerland since 1989, on the grounds that it is too dangerous for European farmers even when wearing protective equipment.

Despite this, Syngenta continues to manufacture the herbicide at its plant in Huddersfield, UK, and export it to countries in South America, Asia and Africa, where it causes thousands of poisonings every year. Our investigation shows that in 2018, British authorities approved the **export of more than 28,000 tonnes of a mixture based on paraquat**.



Paraquat is a flagship product of this "Made in Europe" scandal. This scandal sees pesticides, which are too toxic for the EU and therefore banned, being shipped to countries with weaker regulations. While this practice is legal and known, the main players have been able to hide their activities behind a veil of "commercial confidentiality".

An unprecedented mapping

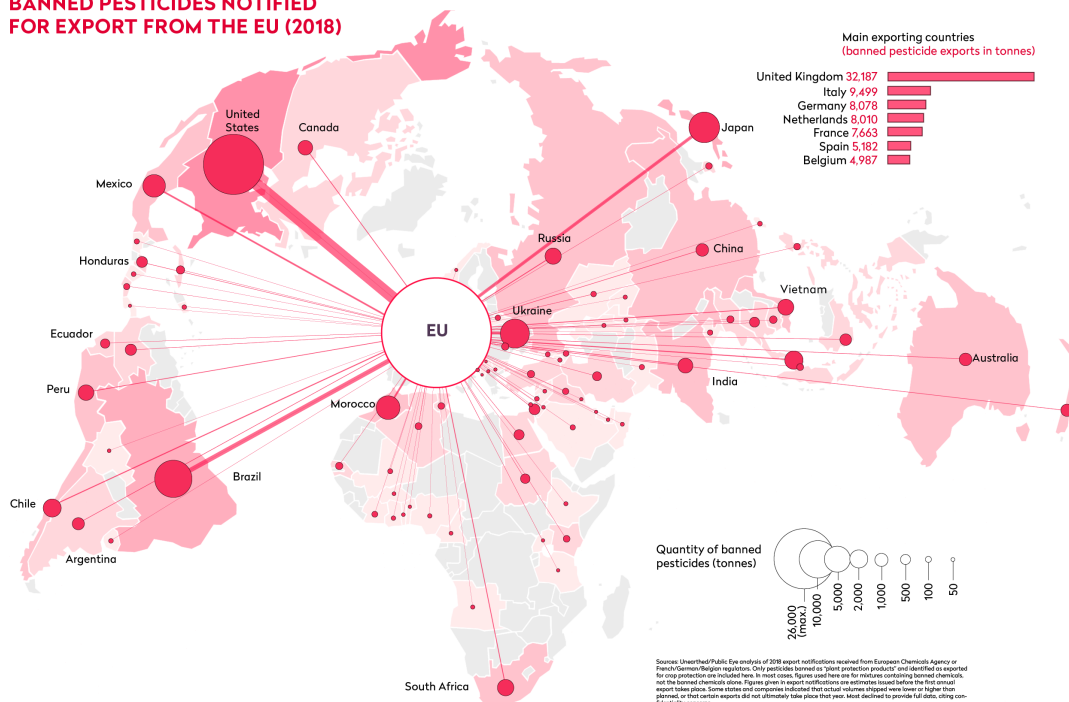
But Public Eye and Unearthed, Greenpeace UK's investigation unit, have spent several months investigating the role of the "Old Continent" in the manufacture and export of some of the world's most dangerous pesticides. To shake up the manufacturers' modesty, we submitted dozens of access to information requests to the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) and to national authorities.

That is how we obtained thousands of "export notifications", the paperwork that companies must complete under European law to export their banned pesticides beyond the European Union. These documents detail the substances, their properties, and the precautions to be taken, as well as their intended uses and estimated export quantities.

The actual export figures may vary from the quantities cited in the export notifications. But these documents still provide us with the most complete available record of this deadly trade. We are publishing the full dataset used for this investigation.

The results of our research are unprecedented: we have mapped for one whole year the export of those pesticides deemed too deadly for the European Union.

BANNED PESTICIDES NOTIFIED FOR EXPORT FROM THE EU (2018)



Click on the map to download the pdf.

Approved for export: More than 81,000 tonnes of outlaw pesticides

Our investigation shows that in 2018 EU member countries approved the export of 81,615 tonnes of pesticides containing substances banned in European fields. They are banned because of the unacceptable risks that they pose to human health and the environment. **The United Kingdom, Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Belgium and Spain account for more than 90 percent of these volumes.**

Three quarters of the 85 importing countries are low- or middle-income countries (LMICs), where the use of such substances presents the highest risks. **Brazil, Ukraine, Morocco, Mexico and South Africa are among the top ten importers of pesticides "Banned in Europe".**

Thirty or so companies lead the way

Syngenta is by far the largest exporter of these deadly pesticides. The Basel-based giant has a large network of factories across the continent, including in the United Kingdom and France, and it uses these factories to manufacture several pesticides, which are banned in the EU, such as paraquat and atrazine. In 2018, it exported nearly three times as much from the European Union as its closest competitor, the US multinational **Corteva**. Data from Swiss authorities shows that Syngenta also exports banned pesticides from Switzerland too.

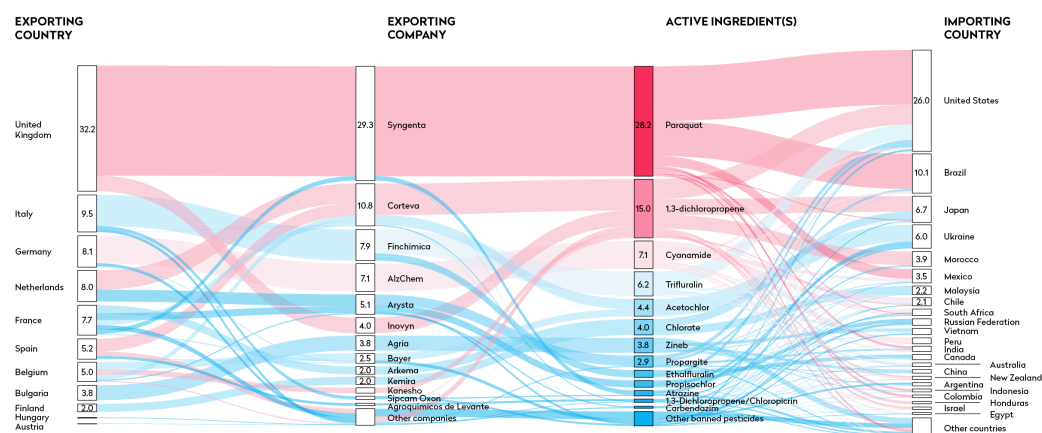
But Syngenta is not alone in wanting its share of the "cake". In 2018, some 30 companies exported banned pesticides from European soil, including German giants **Bayer** and **BASF**. Many smaller companies also play a significant role, including Italy's **Finchimica** and Germany's **Alzchem**.

The list of deadly "poisons" is long

A total of 41 banned pesticides were notified for export from the EU in 2018. The health or environmental risks associated with these substances are dramatic: death from inhalation, birth defects, reproductive or hormonal disorders, or cancer. These substances will also contaminate drinking water sources and poison ecosystems.

BANNED PESTICIDES NOTIFIED FOR EXPORT FROM THE EUROPEAN UNION IN 2018

Quantities in millions of kg
Total = 81,615,000 kg



Sources: Unearthed/PUBLIC Eye analysis of 2018 export notifications received from European Chemicals Agency or French/German/Belgian regulators. Only pesticides banned as "pest protection products" and identified as exported for crop protection are included here. In most cases, figures used here are for mixtures containing banned chemicals, not the banned chemicals alone. Figures given in export notifications are estimates issued before the first export notification phase. Some states and companies indicated that actual volumes shipped were lower or higher than planned, or that certain exports did not ultimately take place that year. Most declined to provide full data, citing confidentiality concerns.

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Syngenta's bestseller Paraquat is at the heart of the scandal

Paraquat alone accounts for more than a third of Europe's exports of banned pesticides. Despite its immense toxicity, this herbicide is massively used in corn, soybean and cotton monocultures. And while more than 50 countries have banned this deadly toxin, sales remain good for Syngenta.

The top 3 of the toxic exports:

First place: Paraquat



About a half of the **28,000 tonnes** of Paraquat notified for export went to the **United States**, where it is marketed as an alternative to Bayer's Roundup. But it's an expensive business. Syngenta faces multiple lawsuits from farmers who claim that Paraquat caused their Parkinson's disease.

Brazil (9,000 tonnes) is another popular destination for this deadly poison, where a ban on the chemical is due from September this year. Paraquat was linked in Brazil to numerous poisonings, Parkinson's disease, and irreversible genome damage.

Most other paraquat exports went to LMICs, such as, **Mexico, India, Colombia, Indonesia, Ecuador and South Africa.**

In these countries, the herbicide is widely used under risky conditions and regularly involved in farmer poisonings.

In the western part of the Indian state of Odisha last year, for example, doctors went on a hunger strike to demand a Paraquat ban after it had killed around 170 people in a single district over two years. In Vietnam, medical doctors reported over 1,000 Paraquat-related deaths every year until the country banned it in 2017.

Amazingly, Syngenta says that "Paraquat is a safe and effective herbicide when used as directed on the label". The company says it "is actively working to minimize such incidents through supporting suicide prevention and end-user training programs".

Despite these facts, Paraquat exports from Europe grew about 30 percent to 36,000 tonnes in 2019, driven largely by higher export volumes to the US as well as to Indonesia, where the chemical is used in palm oil plantations.



Second place: Dichloropropene



Dichloropropene (1,3-D) is the second most exported "banned pesticide". Used as a "soil fumigant" in the cultivation of vegetables, it is a likely carcinogen, and the EU banned it in 2007 because of the risks associated with consumer exposure, groundwater contamination, and potential damage to birds, mammals, aquatic organisms, and other non-target organisms.

Our research found that **15,000 tonnes** of the chemical were notified for export in 2018, often mixed together with Chloropicrin, another banned fumigant pesticide once manufactured as a chemical weapon during World War One.

Dichloropropene is produced by US-based Corteva and Inovyn, a subsidiary of the UK chemicals giant Ineos. And Morocco is one of the main destinations, where dichloropropene is used to grow tomatoes. In 2015, an [FAO study \(french\)](#) showed that just 4 percent of producers use the recommended protections.

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Third place: cyanamide

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The third largest export by volume is a plant growth regulator called cyanamide, used to trigger uniform flowering on fruit trees and vines. European authorities [suspect](#) that it causes cancer and damages fertility. When they [banned it from Europe in 2008](#), they cited “clear indications” that it has harmful effects on human health and in particular on operators, even when wearing protective equipment.

Despite this, the chemical is still manufactured in Germany by a company called Alzchem. In 2018, the company notified for export more than **7,000 tonnes** of a formulation called “Dormex”, the bulk of which went to countries such as **Peru, Chile, South Africa and Mexico**. In **Egypt**, which received **300 tonnes** in 2018, the substance is often involved in [farmer poisonings](#).

Contacted by Public Eye and Unerthed, Alzchem replied: “The countries to which we export have stringent laws for the approval of plant protection products and we train farmers to use our products safely”.

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Time to end this “deplorable” practice

No wonder that in July this year, three dozen UN human rights experts [called](#) on the EU to end this “deplorable” practice. In a joint statement, they say rich countries must close the “loopholes” that allow the export of these banned pesticides to countries “lacking the capacity to control the risks” and where they result in “widespread infringements of human rights to life”.

But the practice is set to increase. When the EU bans pesticides that are proven harmful to human health or the environment, it is unwittingly adding new names to the list of dangerous agrochemicals produced for export. Unerthed and Public Eye have discovered that **in 2019 nine new substances – with a total volume of 8,000 tonnes - were exported for the very first time**.

Ironically, the main export destinations for these banned products - the United States, Brazil, and Ukraine – are the very same [countries](#) that supply the EU with food. Like a boomerang, therefore, the banned pesticides can [find their way back to European consumers](#) via imported food grown with the outlaw toxin.

Companies try to mislead

Of the 30 companies contacted, about 15 responded to our requests, including Syngenta. In essence, the manufacturers put forward four arguments to justify their export of pesticides banned in Europe:

1. their products are safe and they are committed to risk reduction,
2. they respect the laws of the countries in which they operate,
3. each country has the sovereign right to decide which pesticides best meet the needs of its farmers,
4. many pesticides are sold abroad but not in Europe, because the two regions have different conditions and agricultural needs.

At this point, we remind readers that the 41 pesticides concerned have all been explicitly "banned" in the EU "in order to protect human health or the environment". This is why they are included in the list of hazardous chemicals of the EU [PIC Regulation](#) and subject to an export notification requirement.



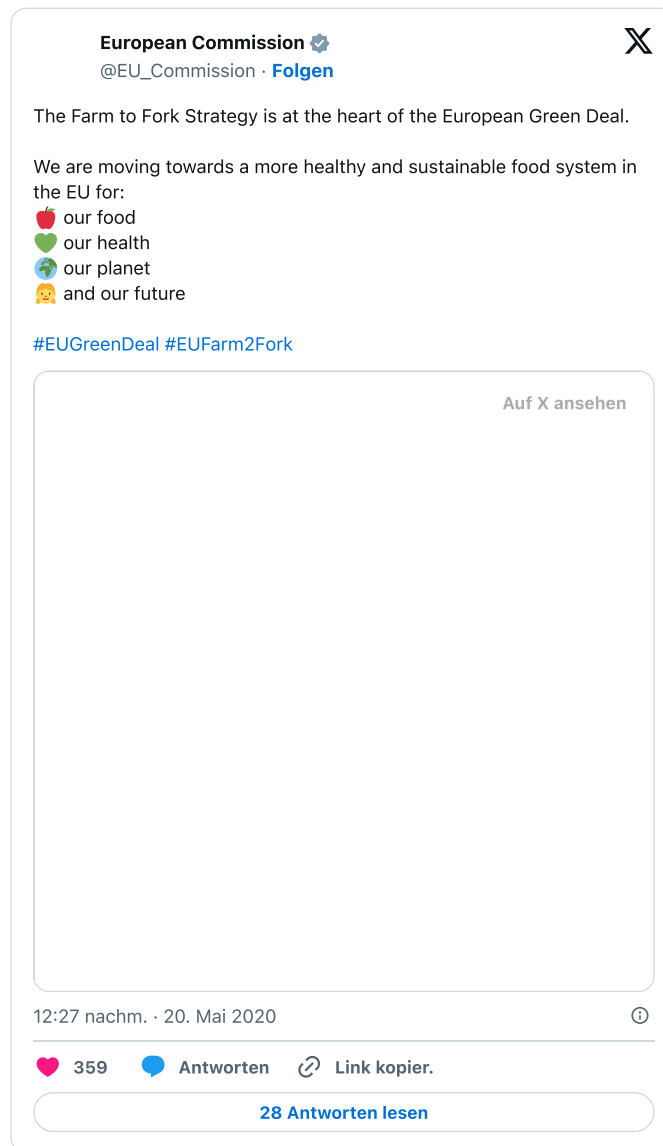
"If the EU, with all its resources, comes to the conclusion that these pesticides pose unacceptable risks and are too dangerous for use, then how could they be safely used in poorer countries when the necessary protections are typically unavailable," says former UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and hazardous substances and wastes, Baskut Tuncak. "Most importing countries are also unable to control and monitor the use of such dangerous substances."

This near-complete absence of control and the higher levels of exposure mean that the damage to human health or the environment is much higher than in rich countries. According to UN estimates, pesticide poisoning kills **more than 200,000 people** in developing countries [each year](#).

"Companies may say that they adhere to national laws, but they also work hard to change and shape these laws", said Alan Tygel, spokesperson for the [Permanent Campaign Against Pesticides and for Life](#) in Brazil. "In my country, agrochemical giants aggressively lobby to relax pesticide regulations and weaken provisions that would otherwise protect people and the environment."

Putting an end to a hypocritical system

In May last year, the European Union launched its [Farm to Fork strategy](#) with great fanfare, positioning itself as a global leader in the transition to a fairer, healthier and more environmentally friendly food and agriculture system. Despite the promise of higher standards, though, the EU turns a blind eye to the export of pesticides too dangerous for use in Europe.



An EU official told Public Eye that European rules on banned pesticide exports were already “stricter than required”. The official said a “ban of exports from the EU will not automatically lead third countries to stop using such pesticides – they may import from elsewhere”. She argued that “convincing them not to use such pesticides will be more effective” and this would be part of the “green diplomacy efforts” planned by the EU to “achieve more sustainable food systems globally.”

When contacted by Public Eye and Uearthed, most governments hide behind the concept of state sovereignty. European regulations ensure that countries receive “robust and sound information about these substances”, said a German representative. “These countries are then able to decide for themselves whether or not that substance should be allowed”.

By allowing the export of banned pesticides to countries unable to manage the risks, states are in violation of their obligations under international human rights law, according to UN experts.

One country, France, is set to ban this practice from 2022, however, after judges rejected a legal challenge by major pesticide manufacturers earlier in the year. The judges said restrictions to entrepreneurial freedom are justifiable given the “damage to human health and the environment”.

“The European Union needs to show true leadership on this issue,” says Baskut Tuncak. “From there we can move towards an even broader consensus to end this abhorrent practice of discrimination and exploitation.”

This version is a translation of a text which was written in French. In case of discrepancy between the different versions, the original French text will prevail.

Next chapter

High-risk destinations



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