

Los cables utilizados Glyphosate Herbicide, a Catalyst for Argentine Politics

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SUBJECT: Glyphosate Herbicide, a Catalyst for Argentine Politics

1. (SBU) Summary: Argentina's pro-government press has been waging a campaign against the use of glyphosate, the active ingredient in Monsanto's widely used Roundup herbicide, which appears to be driven more by local politics than health concerns. The press campaign started with reports in the local newspaper *Página/12* on a local researcher's unverified findings that the herbicide can have toxic effects. The herbicide is used in production of almost all soybeans in Argentina, and local farm groups interpret these criticisms as yet another attack on their sector by the GOA in Argentina's ongoing dispute over export taxes on soybeans. Local contacts speculate that the press campaign, and a subsequent Ministry of Defense ban on glyphosate use on some of its lands used for agricultural production, is fueled by election politics in the lead-up to the June 28 mid-term congressional elections, with the Administration seeking to divert votes away from the opposition—whose most vocal supporters are in the agricultural sector. The GOA is not, however, united in its attack on the use of glyphosate, with the Minister of Science and Technology and parts of the Agriculture Secretariat defending the use of the substance and questioning the scientific credibility of the unpublished research. End Summary.

Monsanto's Moneymaker Under Fire

2. (SBU) On April 13, the leftist Argentine newspaper *Página/12* published an article on a local researcher's unverified findings on the toxic effects of glyphosate, blaming the herbicide of producing birth defects in vertebrates. Since publication of this article, Monsanto and the agricultural sector have faced strong criticism in the pro-government press. Almost all soybeans in Argentina are Roundup Ready (biotech resistant to glyphosate) and are produced using that chemical. Glyphosate is the active ingredient in Monsanto's widely used herbicide Roundup. Monsanto has the largest share of the glyphosate market in Argentina - estimated at 40 percent - making it the most prominent and vulnerable victim of circumstance by such attacks.

3. (SBU) The researcher whose preliminary findings were reported in the article, Dr. Andres Carrasco, is currently head of the research department at the Ministry of Defense and is one of the more left-leaning members of that Ministry. He is also the head of the embryology lab at the prestigious University of Buenos Aires (UBA) and a high-ranking researcher at the National Council of Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET), a well-respected Argentine

research institute. Despite CONICET and the University of Buenos Aires being mentioned in the Página/12 article, the research cited was not carried out under the auspices of these organizations, nor has the research been made available to other researchers for peer review.

Science or Politics?

4. (SBU) Local farm groups interpret these criticisms as yet another attack on their sector by the GOA in Argentina’s ongoing dispute over export taxes on soybeans. Local contacts report that the recent articles, and a Ministry of Defense ban on glyphosate use on some of its lands used for agricultural production, were fueled by the Administration’s desire to divert votes away from their opposition—whose most vocal supporters are in the agricultural sector. With mid-term elections coming on June 28, these contacts speculate that there are strong incentives for the pro-Kirchner campaign to vilify the agricultural sector for short-term political gains, despite long-term problems that this could create for Argentina’s most important export crop. Growing concern among Argentina’s predominantly urban population about shifting agricultural production—away from cattle and domestically consumed crops like corn and wheat—to increasing production of soybeans makes glyphosate an easy target for criticism.

5. (SBU) Within most scientific circles, and the regulatory agencies responsible for approving glyphosate use in Argentina, it is commonly accepted that the alleged study does not have scientific credibility. The findings have yet to be presented for analysis of methodologies, procedures, and/or conclusions. Mainstream Argentine newspapers have only briefly mentioned the issue and often highlight the criticisms/weaknesses of the study. In response to the controversy, the Argentine Secretariat of Agriculture (SENASA) has been collecting information to support its approval of glyphosate use in Argentina. The Embassy’s Agriculture Section has provided to SENASA information on studies conducted on glyphosate, which is BUENOS AIR 00000548 002 OF 003 widely used in the U.S. and is also used in the coca eradication program under Plan Colombia.

Some GOA Entities Support The Attacks...

6. (SBU) Post contacts indicate that certain elements of both the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Health are supporting the campaign against the use of glyphosate. A few days following the Página/12 publication, a small Argentine NGO (comprised mainly of environmentalist lawyers) requested that the Argentine Supreme Court issue an injunction to immediately halt the use of the herbicide. The Defense Ministry issued, on April 21, a press release stating that it was prohibiting the use of glyphosate on lands in urban areas belonging to the Ministry that and are routinely used for agricultural production. Despite this

being portrayed as a widespread ban in the pro-government press, Post contacts indicate that those lands in question only represent a small fraction of the Ministry's lands used for agricultural production.

...But Moderate GOA Voices Are Being Heard

7. (SBU) Several branches of the Argentine government, particularly the Ministry of Science and Technology and the Agriculture Secretariat, are defending the use of glyphosate. Those entities and Argentine academia, as well as scientists outside of Argentina, have requested that Dr. Carrasco provide information on the alleged research. So far, he has not fulfilled those requests. In a recent interview, Dr. Carrasco accused those individuals and entities questioning his research of carrying out a slander campaign against him while he defended his methodology, findings, and the release of preliminary results without peer review. Post contacts report that his superiors at CONICET and other government agencies were disappointed and felt it irresponsible of Dr. Carrasco to publicly present his private findings on such a contentious issue without any outside review.

8. (SBU) In a recent interview, the Minister of Science and Technology, Lino Baranao, who is a very well-respected scientist in the area of biotechnology and animal cloning, made the point that this was not a CONICET study (CONICET is part of his Ministry) and that the findings have not been subject to peer review. Furthermore, he added that any substance, when put in direct contact with animal tissue, can produce adverse effects. Minister Baranao noted that Argentina's usage norms for glyphosate were established by the Secretariat of Agriculture based on scientific research conducted at a global level, and that Dr. Carrasco's findings are not results that would be found in the countryside under normal usage conditions for the herbicide.

Argentina Without Glyphosate?

9. (SBU) The Ministry of Defense's reaction has led some in the agriculture sector to question whether the government will ban glyphosate for all agricultural use in Argentina. Post contacts do not expect that the GOA will actually ban its use, since it would directly affect production of Argentina's main export item—significantly decreasing yields, and therefore GOA revenues—and it would be very hard to enforce. Low production costs are one of Argentina's biggest advantages for soybean production, which is in large part due to the use of glyphosate along with no-till planting. Estimated impacts of a ban vary, but a very rough estimate is that soybean production could drop by 20 percent due to lower yields and a reduction in planted area. Evasion of the ban would likely be widespread but reduced efficiency and production would no doubt occur. Furthermore, glyphosate is routinely used

for many agricultural crops across Argentina and substitutes are often more costly and less effective.

Comment

10. (SBU) Argentina has long been an ally of the United States with respect to biotechnology promotion in various international negotiations, and Roundup Ready biotech soybeans are Argentina's most important export crop. Post contacts within the Secretariat of Agriculture assure us that Argentina will continue to support BUENOS AIR 00000548 003 OF 003 biotechnology in international negotiations and none of our contacts believe that the GOA will go so far as to ban the use of glyphosate, or Roundup Ready soybeans. It is, however, striking that elements of the GOA have launched a frontal attack on Argentina's critical agricultural sector—and its most important crop at that—for short-term political gains in this electoral season. End Comment.

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