

The Italian job: When non-GMO farming didn't work

By Mischa Popoff

Our story begins in sunny Italy where corn provides a lucrative export to countries in Europe with less temperate climates that cannot grow corn. Or at least it did, until a few years ago...

The European corn borer has been wreaking havoc on Italy's corn fields of late. Compounding matters, the feces of this pest provide fodder for a bevy of microscopic fungi which release a lethal natural poison (fumonisin) that can cause permanent neurological damage in a human fetus.

In spite of this, Tiberio Rabboni, the chairman of one of Italy's agricultural departments, insisted that only traditional methods be used to fight this plague, never explaining what these methods were exactly. You see, Rabboni has never run a farm; never worked on one, and yet remains a rabid supporter of organic farming.

Prohibited substances

Eventually Rabboni would concede that pesticides should probably be used, the problem being that the pesticides approved for use in Europe proved ineffective. So Rabboni finally decided that farmers should resort to using prohibited substances, chemicals that are routinely used here in North America but which are deemed "dangerous" by EU authorities who use the precautionary principle as their guide in all such matters.

Corn farmers in North America meanwhile don't have problems like this. In addition to having a longer list of approved chemicals, they grow genetically-modified (GM) varieties of corn that are resistant to this pesky parasite, resulting in less chemical-use per-acre.

Back in Italy, things went from bad to worse when a drought struck in 2010. What little corn survived the corn borer produced withered kernels that were very low in starch, rendering them unsuitable for human consumption. In turn, the population of moths grew exponentially, resulting in even more of the lethal pathogens that feed upon their feces.

The insect resistant GM maize MON810 is authorized for cultivation in Europa but it is banned in Italy. The solution was to feed the bad corn to pigs instead of humans. And that was that.

Not even animal feed

But with concerns still lingering over elevated fumonisin levels, scientists started testing and soon realized that the majority of Italy's corn wasn't even acceptable for animal feed. And so Rabboni decided corn would be imported from America to mix with Italy's toxic corn to bring it down to a level acceptable to feed to animals. That's right... GM corn that Italian farmers are not allowed to grow, imported from America.

Why not let European farmers just grow this GM corn themselves and avoid these problems in the first place? Amid a firestorm of controversy and accusations of hypocrisy, Rabboni would make yet one more pronouncement on everyone's behalf. Italy's seriously-compromised corn harvest would not be cut with healthy GM corn from America. It would all go to energy production instead. Problem solved! Sort of. What were farmers supposed to feed their pigs?

Rabboni then made his last and most ironic decision: GM corn would indeed be imported from America after all, not to be blended with Italy's contaminated corn, but simply to be fed directly to Italy's pigs.

Italy wound up importing 300 percent more American corn than it had at any other time, and paid triple the price to American farmers while Italian farmers who are not allowed so much as a single GM seed on their farms watched the fruits of their labors go for mere cents on the euro, if they were lucky. Many of their corn harvests were simply destroyed if the amount of energy required to transport them to an electrical-generating facility exceeded the cost of the electricity it would produce.