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Campaigns targeting pesticides use to control weeds, insects, fungus and other risks to crop and farm animal health and productivity

Organic Valley identified as secret funder of 'FrogTV' pesticide scare campaign

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- Steve Milloy Wednesday, April 27, 2011

Is American agriculture facing yet another major attack on food safety similar to the 1989 Alar scare?

At JunkScience.com, we take notice when certain tactics by activists and unscrupulous marketing interests repeat themselves. That is certainly the case right now vis-à-vis conventional crop protection products used by farmers and growing online advocacy and marketing campaigns seeking to tie these products to various human diseases and harms to our ecosystem.

Specifically, we're talking about campaigns targeting pesticides use to control weeds, insects, fungus and other risks to crop and farm animal health and productivity. American farmers often find themselves under the microscopes and in the gun sights of advocacy, litigator, niche and organic marketing and other special interest groups. Many of these interest groups have intersecting interests, shared tactics and even common resources they employ in these campaigns.

Throughout 2010, we saw various signs that certain agriculture related special interest groups were organizing and putting in place the elements needed to engage in a major attack on conventional agriculture — specifically targeting crop protection pesticide products. Foundations with a history of funding anti-pesticide organizations were fueling research and activists seeking to show negative health and environmental associations with pesticides. We saw web domain names linked to pesticide issues being registered using privacy protection tools, research and travel funding funneled to activists and sympathetic academics, litigation filings targeting companies and their regulators, and related marketing investments by companies whose product sales benefit from food and health scares.

Intertwined within these tactical components was an emerging allegory frequently repeated by activists and marketers setting the stage for defining villains, victims and heroes associated with their campaign. The villains — evil corporate agribusiness and toxic pesticides. The victims — vulnerable children and their mothers. The heroes — organic food and organic advocates to the rescue.

If we were seeing these signs in 2010 that meant the planning, funding and coordination for them most likely started in 2009 or earlier. These campaigns are detailed, extremely well funded and have multiple moving parts. One such marketing organization known for their past support of similar campaigns attacking competitors in food production recently tipped their hat and served as a proof point to the evolving picture of pending risk to traditional farmers we have been tracking.

In a very subtle, low visibility channel, the head of marketing for the Organic Valley Cooperative, a provider of organic dairy, meat and vegetables with more than a half billion dollars in annual sales, let it slip that Organic Valley was taking credit for an otherwise anonymous Web campaign attacking pesticide use.



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Organic Valley chief marketing executive Theresa Marquez claimed in an April 4th blog post that their campaign, which had launched in January, had been in the works for the better part of two years and part of a broader Organic Valley funded effort to foster "education" about food safety issues in the marketplace.

Called "Frog TV" this campaign is cross-linked online directly and thematically with a much broader attack on pesticides and an emerging allegory with amphibians and children as the victims and chemical pesticide manufacturers as the villain.



This is junk science and [fear profiteering](#) at its peak. You see, the peer reviewed and actual scientific evidence says no one cause is linked to frog-related issues. And specifically, the synthetic pesticides attacked here by Organic Valley have been extensively researched, independently peer reviewed and found safe by government regulators around the globe.

A recent Yale University study specifically noted, "The findings upend the conventional wisdom that agricultural pesticides are largely responsible for the abnormalities." And, another independent, peer reviewed and published study by Oregon State University researchers similarly found, "The search for a single causative factor is often missing the larger picture, they said, and approaches to address the crisis may fail if they don't consider the totality of causes – or could even make things worse."

Unfortunately complex scientific interpretations don't suit the needs of [fear profiteers](#) like Organic valley. While this is just one small example, it reveals a dark side of organic promotions, sometimes called black marketing, which clearly seeks to create fears over less expensive conventionally produced foods in order to sell their higher priced offerings. And by all measures, these tactics appear to be back on the rise by organic marketing interests, advocacy groups and litigators. The last time we saw such high levels of attacks on conventional agriculture and specifically crop protection issues was the 1989 [Alar](#) cancer scare promoted by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC).

Lest we forget, that [Alar](#) campaign was later exposed as a marketing and public relations campaign orchestrated to raise money and increase awareness and support for organic foods. According to the campaign architect David Fenton, "The idea was for the 'story' to achieve a life of its own, and continue for weeks and months to affect policy and consumer habits."

Years later, NRDC backtracked from the alarmist statements made by Janet Hathaway about [Alar](#). NRDC's Hathaway had told CBS News in 1989, "What we're talking about is a cancer causing agent used on food that the EPA knows is going to cause cancer for thousands of children..." Amending their position over ten years later, in a 2000 statement NRDC noted, "The message of that report might have been muddled by the media, and the public might have over-reacted, because we never said there was an immediate danger from Alar..."

However, the damage had been done. Their campaign cost the apple industry an estimated \$150 million and an otherwise safe and effective crop production tool called [Alar](#) was removed from the market — not because of science-based regulatory processes, but through advocacy and market manipulations to promote organic foods by making people afraid of their more affordable conventional counterparts.

And, it appears that we're seeing a similar type of well funded and orchestrated campaign emerging today again targeting conventional crop protection products. We are bombarded daily with claims, like those on Organic Valley's [Frog TV](#), that children are getting cancer and other ills from pesticides. Frogs, bees and other species are mutating or collapsing — all of which will lead to end of human kind — because of pesticides and other agricultural practices. Less-than-transparent marketing and advocacy interests are spending millions of dollars to create these misperceptions for profits.

As with the [Alar](#) scare, the real victims of this current campaign will be farmers who may be forced to abandon well regulated, safe conventional crop protection products due to misplaced political decisions forced on regulators or market conditions created by public misperceptions generated by these campaigns. Consumers who face rising

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food costs or who are scared into spending more of their limited grocery budgets on higher priced organic products as a result of these scares will also suffer.

The signs are in place and coming soon to a theater, website, blog, Facebook page, etc... near you. Farmers and consumers should be prepared for a range of well constructed scare stories amplified by the media, activists and others raising alarms about what we eat and how its grown. We should not forget the lessons of the past, that repeatedly show these scares to be widely overblown with significant undisclosed special interests funding them. The real villains and victims here are much different than those we typically assume and read about online.

Consider sending Organic Valley a message. [Sign this petition](#) and remember to send them and their organic trade association co-conspirators a message where they really feel it — at the supermarket by purchasing affordable non-organic food for your family.



Steve Milloy

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