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Monsanto in the White House Garden: One Recess Appointment That's Toxic

BUZZFLASH NEWS ANALYSIS
by Meg White

Curled up on the couch with The New York Times this past Sunday, I could almost hear the superhero theme song emanating from the White House. Or maybe it was "Macho Man"? This front page piece trumpeted the president's "muscular show," which "suggests a newly emboldened president who is unafraid to provoke a confrontation."

The president, frustrated by months of Republican obstructionism on dozens of his nominees, used executive powers to install 15 of them to work temporarily without Senate confirmation until the end of 2011.

The predictable blowback from the GOP got a fair share of eye-rolls from those who remember recent administrations' usage of the recess appointment and who recognize what Salon.com termed the "underreported fact that huge amounts of the federal government remain dramatically understaffed."

Obama was quick to make the point that "most of the men and women whose appointments I am announcing today were approved by Senate committees months ago, yet still await a vote of the Senate."

Oh, you mean like Dawn Johnsen, Mr. President? You know, the Office of Legal Counsel nominee who won approval from the Judiciary Committee recently, after months of being held up by Republicans who hypocritically criticized her tenure with a pro-choice group while at the same time condemning her condemnation of the previous administration's clearly skewed judicial logic? (Because obviously, good lawyering for groups that the Pope doesn't like is way worse than bad lawyering for the Bush Administration's torture lobby.)

Nope; OLC will have to wait a little longer. Johnsen was not among the 15 Obama chose to install, which The New York Times speculated was evidence the president "did not want to go too far in inflaming partisan passions."

Unfortunately, the president was more than willing to inflame the passions of the progressive and foodie communities, and perhaps even his own wife. One of the 15 installed was Islam Siddiqui, who just left his post as vice president of science and regulatory affairs for CropLife America, the lobby group representing pesticide and biotech crop producers and distributors. As far as PR goes, CropLife's basic goal is to replace the term "pesticide" with "crop protection" and "genetically-modified crops" with "science." CropLife's clients include Monsanto, Dow, Syngenta and DuPont.

Siddiqui managed to pass through his hearing with the Senate Finance Committee back in December, despite his being a lobbyist for some of the most feared and reviled companies in the world. But as the Center for Biological Diversity (one of more than 100 organizations that actively opposed his nomination) points out, it's not just the word "lobby" that tarnishes Siddiqui's image (emphasis mine):

As undersecretary for marketing and regulatory programs at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Siddiqui oversaw the development of the first national organic labeling standards, which **allowed sewage sludge-fertilized, genetically modified, and irradiated food to be labeled as organic** before public outcry forced more stringent standards. Siddiqui has derided the European Union's ban on hormone-treated beef and has **vowed to pressure the European Union to accept more genetically modified crops**.

CropLife America, formerly known as the National Agricultural Chemicals Association, **lobbies to weaken the Endangered Species Act and the Clean Water Act, claiming that pesticides are not pollutants** because of their intended beneficial effect and that pesticides positively impact endangered species. The group has **lobbied to allow pesticides to be tested on children** and to allow the continued use of persistent organic pollutants and ozone-depleting chemicals.

Testing pesticides on children? Really? I wonder what Michelle would have to say about that one. Maybe she already knows. After all, she's been a direct victim of CropLife's lobbying efforts.

When the first lady was planning the White House produce garden, CropLife sent her a letter asking her to use her spotlight to lobby for pesticides, bio-engineered plants and other elements of "conventional farming" (emphasis mine):

Much of the food considered not wholesome or tasty is the result of how it is stored or prepared rather than how it is grown. **Fresh foods grown conventionally are wholesome and flavorful yet more economical...**

As you go about planning and planting the White House garden, **we respectfully encourage you to recognize the role conventional agriculture plays** in the U.S. in feeding the ever-increasing population, contributing to the U.S. economy, and providing a safe and economical food supply.

The letter goes on to offer CropLife's educational services, presumably so industry can brainwash out all that the D.C.-area kids learned from working in the White House garden. There's nothing more dangerous to these people than kids who know how to feed themselves properly.

But her husband's unfortunate decision affects much more than Michelle Obama's garden. The Center for Biological Diversity's mention of CropLife's involvement in European markets was not just a scary aside.

As the chief agricultural negotiator in the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative [15], Siddiqui will be in charge of agricultural negotiations in free trade agreements as well as the World Trade Organization Development Agenda. No doubt Siddiqui's extensive knowledge of the pesticide and GMO industry will help the office deal with "agricultural regulatory issues" such as biotechnology and cloning. And if there were any doubt of continued subsidies for Big Ag in the annual Farm Bill, he'll be there to manage that one, too.

In other words, Siddiqui's adherence to the unsustainable policies of corporate "food" will have broad implications both here and around the world. As this open letter to the Senate in opposition to Siddiqui's confirmation [16] points out:

We believe Siddiqui's nomination severely weakens the Obama Administration's credibility in promoting healthier and more sustainable local food systems here at home. His appointment would also send a harmful signal to the world that the United States plans to continue down the worn but now obsolete path of chemical and energy-intensive industrial agriculture while promoting toxic pesticides, inappropriate seed biotechnologies and unfair trade agreements on nations that neither want nor can afford them.

And I thought Monsanto had it good in the Bush Administration. But it turns out that Big Ag is never lonely, no matter who's in control.

Not only has Obama already installed Roger Beachy, a former Monsanto big wig, in charge of policy at the USDA, but CropLife is an equal opportunity corrupter that is hedging its bets in the coming election. In fact, 66 percent of the campaign funds they've donated in this election season so far went to Democrats, an increase of about 10 percent over 2008.

Furthermore, Siddiqui gave the maximum individual donation to Barack Obama's presidential campaign in 2008, though not until it was kind of obvious who was going to win. Not that things would be any different if he hadn't, though. CropLife President Jay Vroom gave the maximum amount to Republican presidential candidate John McCain around that same time in the campaign.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. After all, everyone has to eat, right?