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In Monsanto's footsteps

Bayer urged Mexico and Thailand to withdraw the glyphosate ban, according to leaked documents

- By Andreas Knobloch

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Thai government decided to ban three pesticides, including the plant toxin glyphosate. But shortly before the ban was due to come into force, the government in Bangkok backed out. "I was particularly interested in the role of the USA in this," says Nathan Donley, scientist at the non-profit US environmental organization Center for Biological Diversity (CBD), opposite "nd". Documents made it clear that chemical companies and the agricultural lobby were intensely involved in US influence in Thailand to prevent the glyphosate ban. "Then I saw on the news that Mexico is taking steps similar to Thailand's to ban glyphosate and other pesticides. That prompted us to request the documents. "

Under the Freedom of Information Act, the CBD requested the release of internal records; the British daily Guardian published it last week. The published email traffic shows that the German Bayer group worked closely with US government officials to pressure Mexico's government to lift its proposed glyphosate ban. The government of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador gives its farmers until 2024 to stop the use of glyphosate and other pesticides, as well as the cultivation and use of GM maize. The

arguments cited for the ban are food security and sovereignty as well as health aspects. Glyphosate is a component of various weed killers and has been linked to cancer and other health problems. In Germany, too, herbicides containing glyphosate are to be banned from 2024.

Internal emails from the United States Trade Representative (USTR) and other US government agencies detail how Bayer urged the US administration to put pressure on Mexico after the country initially refused to import glyphosate from China in late 2019. "You can see the same approach as chemical companies claim the US government to exert influence on what are usually smaller countries when they try to raise environmental and health standards," says Donley, referring to the example of Thailand.

For example, Stephanie Murphy, Bayer's representative for government affairs, asked the USTR Director for International Trade Policy, Leslie Yang, in an email regarding the rejected glyphosate delivery, whether she could "discuss the matter further with the USTR" and whether it "an opportunity to get involved through the USMCA «. USMCA, the newly negotiated trade agreement between the United States, Mexico and Canada, was signed in late 2018 and came into force on July 1 of last year. The industry lobbyist CropLife America, which is financed by Bayer among others, was also involved. Glyphosate played a role in talks between US and Mexican officials in early 2020.

In later emails, Murphy wrote to Yang about the need for "high-level political engagement." That actually happened. In May, US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer warned Mexico's then Secretary of Commerce Graciela Márquez Colín that the GM corn and glyphosate problems threatened to undermine the "strength of our bilateral ties."

Bayer denies that his actions are illegal. "Like many companies and organizations that operate in highly regulated industries, we also provide information and contribute to scientifically sound political decision-making and regulatory processes," the company

wrote when asked. "Our relationships with everyone working in the public sector are routine, professional, and comply with all laws and regulations."

Donley, a proponent of a pesticide ban, doesn't believe any laws have been violated either. "But that's not the standard we should be setting either," he says. Bayer certainly has the right to ask the US government for support, but the US government is committed to wider interests than the agenda of a chemical company. "If you look at the email exchanges, you can see that the US government is doing more or less whatever Bayer asks it to do. This is extremely worrying. "

At the moment it looks like Mexico is willing to reduce the use of chemicals in agriculture. "The US seems very much against it, so I'm not sure how this will end," Donley said. "What shouldn't happen, however, is that US diplomacy comes under the influence of corporations - and that's what is happening here."