

Brussels 21 October 2024

Dear MEPs,

We, as a network of NGOs working on reducing the use and negative impacts of pesticides and genetically engineered organisms on biodiversity and human health, reach out to you with an urgent request.

As you may have seen, recent revelations from a [Lighthouse Reports' investigation](#)<sup>1</sup> showed how Trump's administration set up a strategy to torpedo the EU Green Deal (notably the Farm to Fork Strategy) using influence and misinformation campaigns to undermine Europe's food quality. The PR firms behind this strategy were also responsible for profiling hundreds of scientists, journalists and environmental activists from all over the world, including Europe.

We consider this scandal to be a clear-cut example of foreign interference in crucial EU policy. The mentioned PR campaign was not only co-financed by the US government but had the successful aim of bringing down Farm to Fork (F2F) policies (as part of the EU Green Deal), like the 50% pesticide reduction (Sustainable Use of Pesticides Regulation).

In 2022, [Corporate Europe Observatory already shed light](#)<sup>2</sup> on a [US Department of Agriculture-backed campaign](#)<sup>3</sup> to attack European efforts to bring agricultural policies more in line with planetary boundaries<sup>4</sup>. Recently, via the Lighthouse publications, it became clear that two PR companies - the White House Writers Group (WHWG) and v-Fluence had contracts with the USDA, and jointly prepared strategies to bring down European policies, [which both the European Commission and science consider essential](#)<sup>5</sup>.

As Lighthouse/Le Monde described, [a specific event on July 29](#)<sup>6</sup> 2020, jointly organised by USDA and WHWG together with the ECR parliamentary group, served as kick-off for a campaign that ultimately was instrumental in undermining the F2F Strategy by changing the narrative and political debate. Le Monde writes that "*in their November 19, 2020 memo to the US Department of Agriculture, v-Fluence and WHWG not only pledged to defeat the F2F strategy and the European Green Deal, they also proposed to step up operations in the countries of the South*".

### **Some of the main findings from Lighthouse Reports include:**

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<sup>1</sup>Lighthouse Reports is an investigative team that produces deeply reported stories in the public interest. This investigation was conducted in collaboration with [The Guardian](#), [Le Monde 1,2,3](#)), [The New Lede](#), [ABC News Australia](#), [The New Humanitarian](#), [The Wire](#), and [The Continent](#).

<sup>2</sup>

<https://corporateeurope.org/en/2022/03/agribusiness-lobby-against-eu-farm-fork-strategy-amplified-ukraine-war>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2021/10/26/usda-announces-initial-supporters-sustainable-productivity-growth>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://zenodo.org/records/8128624>

<sup>6</sup><https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/us-agriculture-secretary-perdue-to-discuss-food-security-in-a-post-covid-world-with-eu-commissioner-wojciechowski-301099174.html>

- The Lighthouse investigation reveals that in 2020, the US government awarded a contract worth up to \$4.9 million to White House Writers Group and v-Fluence, as part of the US strategy to undermine the EU's Farm to Fork strategy. The contract also included services provided by v-Fluence, and access to the Bonus Eventus social media network.
- The two firms acted as co-managers of Bonus Eventus, the online social network, which the US government funded to profile critics of pesticides and GMOs and more than 3,000 organisations, including dozens based in Europe.
- The findings are part of a wider investigation which found that between 2013 and 2019, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) channelled over \$400,000 to v-Fluence for the purpose of "stakeholder tracking" of industrial agriculture critics. As part of this "monitoring", v-Fluence created a private social network called Bonus Eventus, which profiled more than 500 individuals, including scientists, UN human rights experts, environmentalists, and journalists, as well as over 3,000 organisations.
- V-Fluence and its director - a former Monsanto corporate communication director - have been accused of leading a 20-year campaign to suppress information about the health risks of Paraquat, a very highly toxic herbicide banned in the European Union and associated with Parkinson's, an incurable neurological disease.

**We would like to ask you to use your voice as MEPs, to address your concerns to both the US embassy in Brussels as well as the European Commission. We urge you to:**

- **Call for an immediate investigation** into possible breaches of European GDPR rules linked to the filing of EU citizens. Encourage the European Commission to strictly implement the existing privacy laws to protect scientific communities, journalists, and environmental activists from being targeted by covert profiling and misinformation campaigns.
- **Urge the European Institutions** to restart the ambitious work on the EU F2F, to achieve the much-needed science-based Food Policy in Europe. Given the success of the US and industry-led misinformation campaign in derailing the EU Green Deal, consider the investment of similar budgets on a public information campaign that will contribute to a better comprehension of the 2019 ambitions.
- **Demand transparency** from both the US government and EU institutions regarding external attempts to interfere with the EU's Green Deal and Farm to Fork strategy; as well as the funding and operations of the PR firms involved, focusing on their influence on EU policies and public opinion manipulation.
- **Advocate for a legally binding transparency register**, better rules against conflicts of interest for MEPs and an authority with sufficient resources and competencies to monitor and enforce compliance with the rules, to expose covert or manipulative influence on democratic processes.

In our view, these kinds of toxic covert PR campaigns contribute to a political climate [where environmental and climate activists are increasingly being repressed](#)<sup>7</sup>, which threatens basic civil rights. These specific campaigns to undermine the EU Green Deal are not only violating democratic values and intoxicating the public debate with ‘fact-free politics’ and fake news, but above all, bring great damage to the health of your electorate and the future of their children.

Finally, influencing the scientific debate has been instrumental in this ‘**torpedo the Farm to Fork campaign**’. Several [scientific studies on the Green Deal](#) have been paid for and instrumentalised by commercial actors in the food-agri industry. Three years ago, [internal lobby documents from the agro-business lobby Copa-Cogeca](#) leaked revealed a coordinated attack by industrial agri-food lobbies on the EU’s F2F ambitions. The lobbying strategy succeeded in creating an echo chamber of anti-F2F messages using partial findings from a series of academic ‘impact studies’, many of which were funded by the industry itself.

Both Copa-Cogeca and CropLife, the pesticide manufacturers' interest group, paid for such studies at the Wageningen University & Research (WUR). In early October, Sjoukje Heimovaara, chair of the Board of Governors at WUR, criticised the fact that WUR researchers collaborated in the PR activities of CropLife. “*That should not have happened, because it creates at least the appearance of a conflict of interest,*” [she commented to a Dutch TV programme](#)<sup>8</sup>.

All the examples exposed and mentioned above, clearly point in the direction of manipulation of science and the political and societal debate by agrochemical companies. As elected representatives of EU citizens, EU citizens and consumers yourselves, who time and again have spoken out for a reduction of pesticide use<sup>9</sup>, we believe you are best placed to defend those societal demands.

On behalf of this civil society coalition, we thank you for your attention and for taking action. For any further information or questions, we remain at your disposal.

Kind regards,

Hans van Scharen and Nina Holland (Corporate Europe Observatory, CEO)  
Martin Dermine and Natalija Svrtan (PAN Europe, ECI Save Bees and Farmers)  
Jörg Rohwedder (International Executive Director Foodwatch)  
Elena Artico and Natacha Cingotti (Foodwatch)  
Clara Bourgin (Friends of the Earth Europe)  
Christoph Then (*Executive Director Testbiotech*, Germany)  
Francesco Romizi (ISDE- International Society of Doctors for Environment)

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/07/22/europe-heats-silencing-climate-activists-emerging-troubling-trend>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bnnvara.nl/zembla/artikelen/wur-erkent-wetenschappers-hadden-niet-mogen-deelnemen-aan-pesticidenlobby>

<sup>9</sup> [https://citizens-initiative.europa.eu/initiatives/details/2019/000016\\_en](https://citizens-initiative.europa.eu/initiatives/details/2019/000016_en)

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