



Roundtable on Responsible Soy: Can Monoculture Soy be Responsible?

Briefing

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What is the Roundtable on Responsible Soy (RTRS)?

The RTRS is a "multi-stakeholder dialogue that intended to promote the use of a responsible standard of soy production, processing and trade". It was first proposed in 2005 by WWF after the Basel Criteria for Responsible Soy Production failed to gather multi-stakeholder support (ie, was not supported by big business).

In order to get the big soy players – ADM, Bunge, Cargill, etc – to participate, WWF had to greatly weaken their approach. That included dodging the whole issue of GMOs, and also weakening the requirements around deforestation. As it stands now, the RTRS draft "criteria" totally ignore the critical issue of GMOs – and they allow deforestation of the Amazon as long as it is in an area that is "zoned" for agricultural use.

In practice this is likely to mean that big farmers will continue to bribe local government to re-"zone" areas of the Amazon as open for clearing for agriculture. So clearing of the rainforest and loss of family farms will simply continue, but will be painted green with a big "RTRS Approved" seal.

Why Responsible, not Sustainable?

The major soy belts in the world are in North and South America, where production is very intensive and involves massive areas of monocultured, highly mechanised farming heavily dependent of agro-chemicals and fossil fuels. In South America, production is often on land that was recently forest or other natural ecosystems. The majority of soy is shipped to provide animal feed for intensive animal and poultry production systems in Europe, North America and the Far East. Given these facts, even the greatest spin-doctors alive would find it hard to describe soy production as sustainable.

Who is behind the RTRS?

The driving force behind RTRS is the corporations who control soy production in South America, including ADM, Cargill, Bunge (soy commodity traders), Grupo Andre Maggi (a soy grower and producer in South America), and financial institutions (eg, Banco Real of Brazil). These corporations are supported by a number of NGOs such as WWF, Conservation International and Solidaridad (a Dutch Fair Trade Organisation). The RTRS executive board has 15 members from the various sectors of the membership.

Who else is involved?

Members of the RTRS include corporations from the entire soy supply chain. The biotechnology giants Monsanto and Syngenta have been accepted as full members from February 2009. Other members include soy producers, companies in the supply chain (from seed and agrochemical companies to biofuel companies to food manufacturers to retailers) and civil society organisations. The following are full members: Marks and Spencer, Unilever, Somerfield (now owned by the Co-op), Danisco, Carrefour (a French supermarket chain), Ahold (a Dutch supermarket chain), BP International and Shell International. There are also a number of organisations with "observer" status.

What is the role of WWF?

WWF was a founding member of the RTRS after their initiative with Coop Switzerland to establish the Basel Criteria failed to gather widespread support amongst producers (only two Brazilian producers met the criteria). WWF is a member of the RTRS Executive Board and WWF's Luis Laranja is a vice president. WWF is an international conservation organisation operating in 100 countries and employing 4000 staff. It has strong links to industry, including nineteen corporations

cited in the National Wildlife Federation's recent survey of the 500 worst industrial polluters. These companies included such recognized environmental offenders as Union Carbide, Exxon, Monsanto, Weyerhaeuser, Du Pont, and Waste Management.

Does RTRS include GM soy?

Unlike the Basel Criteria, which specifically excluded GM soy, the current RTRS drafts will allow GM soy to be accredited as "responsible". WWF's justification for including GM soy is, "GM soy is already present in the environment."

The RTRS position on GM soy is:

"The RTRS wishes to promote responsible soy production irrespective of the type of production model. Any production model has room for improvement - be it genetically modified, conventional, organic or others - and each of the practiced production models will need model-specific improvement indicators. The RTRS will help to design model-specific criteria for responsible production."

WWF's logic is that the Round Table on Responsible Soy is about assuring the sustainable production of soy whether it is GM or non-GM, but this is disingenuous. In those South American countries where soy is proving destructive both socially and environmentally, the crop is overwhelmingly GM soy. GM soy crops are NOT sustainable because of the way they are managed using Monsanto's broad spectrum herbicide Roundup.

What's the problem with GM soy?

GM soy dominates production in Argentina and Paraguay and parts of Brazil and is now moving into Bolivia and Uruguay. Non-GM soy is still grown extensively in Brazil. Monsanto's Roundup Ready (RR) is the only type of GM soy currently cultivated in South America or anywhere else. RR soy is genetically modified to tolerate Monsanto's best selling herbicide Roundup, based on the chemical glyphosate, which kills most plants including their root systems. GM soy is (like non-GM) grown in massive fields. The RR gene allows the growing crop to be sprayed killing all weeds but allowing the crop to grow on. The GM soy monocultures have caused massive environmental, health and environmental problems including:

- Over-reliance on one herbicide (Roundup), resulting in the development of resistant weeds, especially Johnson grass. This is leading to the use of greater volumes of herbicides, and older weedkillers, such as paraquat, in order to attempt to control the resistant weeds. Reports of Roundup resistant weeds come from Brazil, Argentina, and the United States.
- Health problems for local people from aerial spraying of herbicides.
- Destruction of forest and non-forest ecosystems.
- Rural depopulation and the break-up of mixed farming systems.
- Rapid expansion of soy production into high-value conservation areas, like the Amazon, without proper environmental impact assessment.
- Human rights infringements against smallholders, farm workers and indigenous peoples, as large farmers move in to take over land in Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil.
- Malnutrition due to lack of balance in the diet in some rural communities, as soy production displaces the previous diversity of crops that fed the local population.

RTRS draft criteria do not adequately address any of these major impacts on people and the environment.

How does RTRS deal with destruction of forests and other habitats?

The Basel criteria contained strict protections for the rainforest. The RTRS, in contrast, has come under criticism for its weak criteria that have no power to protect the rainforest and other sensitive ecosystems from the devastation wreaked by soy expansion.

RTRS states:

"The RTRS recognizes the importance of forests, rivers, biodiversity and fragile ecosystem conservation. It stresses the importance of respecting legal limits on deforestation, all conservation areas and international treaties on that matter. The RTRS also recognizes that society must create mechanisms to remunerate farmers and other landowners who preserve biodiversity-rich areas."

But the current RTRS drafts allow for further soy expansion on land cleared of native vegetation before a cut-off date.

After this cut-off date, clearance will take place only on land that has been designated as an agricultural expansion area by an official and participatory process (land use planning) and outside areas identified as High Conservation Value Areas. How this will be achieved in practice is not addressed by the RTRS principles and draft criteria, especially in areas where illegal logging is taking place.

No cut off date has been agreed yet but it is likely to be the date when the RTRS criteria come into effect.

In short, the RTRS principles and draft criteria will allow deforestation of the Amazon as long as it is in an area that is "zoned" for agricultural use.

What that means in practice is that big farmers will continue to bribe local government to "zone" areas of the Amazon as open for clearing for agriculture. So clearing of the rainforest will simply continue, but now painted green with a big "RTRS Approved" seal. RTRS does not specify how such activity will be prevented.

Have local people in the soy belt been given an equal voice in the process of setting the RTRS "Criteria?"

No. There are NGOs on the Development Group, which worked out many of the details of the Criteria, but in fact, it was the Executive Board of the RTRS – strongly controlled by multinational soy interests and bankers – that set the terms of reference for the Development Group. For instance, many on the DG wanted to include in the RTRS criteria restrictions on GM soy, but the Executive Board forbid that they consider this possibility. Another example: It will be the Executive Board that sets the cut-off date mentioned above. Thus, although there is an appearance of democratic stakeholder participation, multinational and financial institutions are pulling the strings. Many groups feel a primary intention is to use the RTRS to legitimise the irresponsible and unsustainable practice of industrial soy production and justify even greater expansion, regardless of the human and environmental costs.

Gerardo Mesquida of the Cordoba, Argentina group, Stop the Spraying, says:

"Soya in South America is not and never can be responsible, so long as it is part of the western model of production for profit."

How will RTRS be monitored and enforced?

This is not clear. How monitoring and enforcement will be paid for or when and how sanctions will be applied if criteria are broken or ignored is not clear either. Current drafts are vague in these

areas. For example:

- Habitats for rare, threatened or endangered native or endemic species are maintained and safeguarded.
- Everyone should do planning and monitoring and mapping. Monitoring procedures need to be scale dependent. The monitoring could be done at group level if necessary.

These are clearly not clear-cut, verifiable performance criteria. Such "criteria" hardly present a convincing plan to prevent further biodiversity losses.

Similarly how abuses of land and human rights will be monitored and enforced over thousands of square kilometers of land is not made clear.

Will RTRS certified soy mean anything to consumers?

No – the current criteria will add to the confusion by allowing GM and unsustainably grown soy to be certified. The fundamental problem with the RTRS draft criteria is that they are seeking to justify an unsustainable production system that most consumers would find unacceptable. Currently the RTRS are putting forward a two-tier system for traceability of accredited RTRS soy based on segregation and “mass balance”. The latter allows soy loads to be certified as meeting the RTRS criteria whilst containing unspecified amounts of non certified soy leaving consumers even more in the dark.

Will RTRS certified soy command a premium price?

Although commodity companies may try to demand a premium for RTRS soy, it seems very unlikely that it will successfully command a premium price especially if full traceability is not on offer and the damaging production aspects of soy are allowed to continue largely unaffected. One comment on the current draft proposals casts further doubt:

“Large assumption that there would be a premium for responsible soy based upon previous experiences in other markets [sic]. Globalgap started 12 years ago with producers assuming that the market would play [sic] a premium for responsibly produced products but in fact that responsibility was the implied [sic] within the product production. This assumption is a weakness of this model as the market will not play [sic] a premium for a mainstream product.”

Who is opposing RTRS?

An open letter calling on the RTRS process to be abandoned has been signed by over 60 organisations from around the world (as of 12th May 2009), including the Global Forest Coalition, Friends of the Earth International and country based groups in the USA, India, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Uruguay.

What next?

The RTRS Executive Board meets 25 May 2009 in Brazil where the RTRS criteria will be finalised, including the expected inclusion of GM soy. On 28 May 2009 the General Assembly of the RTRS will meet in Campinas, Brazil, for a final vote approving these criteria. The Executive Board will meet the following day to rubberstamp the final version.