

Opposition to Round Table on Responsible Soy

Open Letter

May 2010

The undersigned organisations reject the “responsible” label for soy developed by the Round Table on Responsible Soy (RTRS). The attempts by the Round Table on Responsible Soy to greenwash large scale genetically modified (GM) soy production by labelling it as “responsible” will aggravate the problems caused by industrial soy production, instead of providing solutions.

The RTRS is expected to launch its “responsible” label after its conference in June 2010 in Brazil. Industrial soy production has caused rampant social and environmental damage in South America, including habitat destruction, deforestation, destruction of local food production systems, degraded soil fertility, exposure of local people to toxic pesticides and the large scale displacement of local communities and small farming systems.

In the North, large scale soy production has facilitated unprecedented industrialisation of the food chain, increasing reliance on imported animal feed and promoting unsustainable animal production with negative consequences for farming, the environment and people’s health, and encouraging unsustainable consumption patterns. Intensive meat, dairy and egg production is an important contributor to global greenhouses gas emissions , while agrofuels from soy could produce more emissions than fossil fuels.

Multinational companies reap huge financial rewards from this unsustainable production system at both ends.

The RTRS cannot succeed in its stated aims to deliver “responsible” soy because:

1) RTRS lacks support and is not representative

The RTRS claims to be an “international multi-stakeholder initiative” , but in reality the scheme has little or no support from sustainable family farmers, social movements or civil society, either in South America or in Europe. On the contrary the scheme faces strong criticism from these organizations especially in soy producing countries. Furthermore, major players in the Brazilian soy industry – APROSOJA and ABIOVE - have turned their backs on the RTRS due to disagreements on the inclusion of even the very weak deforestation clause (see 2).

2) RTRS criteria are seriously flawed

The RTRS claims to be developing a “responsible” label for mainstream soy, but is based on a wholly inadequate set of principles and criteria. For example:

- GMOs and pesticides

The RTRS will certify genetically modified (GM) soy as responsible. Most soy in South America is genetically modified to be resistant to the herbicide Glyphosate (marketed by Monsanto as RoundupReady soy). Both GM and non-GM soy are based on monocultures, both have destructive impacts on biodiversity and local communities and both use a range of agrochemicals, but herbicide-resistant soy has higher negative biosafety impacts than non-GM soy, particularly for soil life and fertility. While GM soy is promoted to farmers as a way to reduce labour costs, the continuous and indiscriminate application of herbicides resulting from the use of herbicide-resistant crops has severe impacts on the livelihoods and health of communities living around the soy fields. It has also accelerated the emergence of herbicide resistant weeds, which are a serious problem across thousands of hectares of soy in the US, Argentina and Brazil. This is also forcing a return to using more dangerous pesticides such as 2,4-D (a component of Agent Orange).

- Deforestation and soy expansion

The RTRS criteria for “responsible” soy agreed in May 2009 do not prevent further deforestation. According to the RTRS, “responsible” soy can be grown on land that has been deforested as recently as May 2009. “Responsible” soy can even be grown on land that will be deforested in the future, as long as the producer can provide “scientific evidence” that there were no primary forest, or High Conservation Value Areas (HCVAs), on that land and that it did not affect “local peoples’ land” (which is not further defined).

It is not clear how these flawed criteria will be monitored and enforced.

3) RTRS cannot address macro-level impacts of industrial farming

Importantly, the RTRS cannot address the deforestation, greenhouse gas emissions and social conflicts caused by displacing agricultural activities elsewhere (Indirect Land Use Change). Other impacts include rising food prices and huge pressures on land and resources.

4) RTRS claims climate benefits

RTRS “responsible” soy claims to have climate benefits, but would largely supply feed for unsustainable intensive poultry, livestock and agrofuel production. The perverse lobbying at the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen of the RTRS along with biotech giant Monsanto to gain carbon credits for industrial soy production gained them the international Angry Mermaid Award for worst climate lobbying. In the EU, the RTRS is trying to gain accreditation under the EU Renewable Energy Directive (RED) that contains the widely opposed 10% agrofuel target.

Some of the pilot projects of the RTRS involve small scale farming of soy, but this cannot mask the fact that the bulk of the RTRS’s “responsible” soy will be grown on large-scale plantations with heavy pesticide use and no consideration for the local people or the environment.

Consumers are currently prevented from seeing the extent of the damage done by industrial (RoundupReady) soy as it happens far from their homes. European supermarkets use the RTRS to claim they are acting responsibly while carrying on with business as usual. Any supermarket that participates in the RTRS risks a backlash from its customers.

To address the impacts outlined above the undersigned organisations demand real solutions that move to a sustainable food production system that include:

- phasing out monoculture production systems and instead promoting agro-ecological systems, diversification of production and stimulation of local production for local markets that contribute to food security and food sovereignty in producer and consumer countries.
- promoting genuine land reforms and land rights in producing countries, which will address highly inequitable land ownership and concentration;
- drastically changing production models and consumption patterns required to feed a population of 9 billion in 2050 sustainably and equitably ; this means reducing the shocking levels of overconsumption and waste in the industrialised world
- abandoning intensive meat, dairy and egg production systems and moving towards low-input livestock systems
- eliminating Europe's dependency on plant protein imports and support a move towards more low input, grass based livestock systems.
- stopping the promotion of agrofuel production as a climate solution for rich countries and instead developing better transport systems that reduce demand for energy and fuel.