

Roundup Ready or Roundup Rip Off?

Dear Sir

RE: letter from Tony Combes - Monsanto - published in your Dec/Jan 2004 edition.

I have been making golf courses since the mid 1970's and during that time Roundup (glyphosate) has always been regarded as "safe" because the manufacture has told us for thirty years that it breaks down into a harmless state as soon as it touches the soil. Glyphosate has proved itself to be a very useful herbicide to golf course builders and greenkeepers, simply because we all believed that it poses no risk to the environment, and more specifically, to water courses. But if, in certain precise cases, it does not break down when it hits the ground and if, in certain precise cases, it can get into watercourses what then?

Let's wait until some objective (i.e. Monsanto-free) scientific studies have been established before we pass judgement on this aspect of the "plant protection product". (Incidentally, I am at a loss as to understand how a chemical whose unique raison d'être is to kill plants can be described as a "plant protection product". No wonder you need to define words like "water courses" for us lesser - Non-Santo-

mortals. George Orwell would have been proud of you, Mr Combes.)

Mr Combes's totally muddled defence of Roundup against Danish government claims regarding its drinking-water pollution potential, artfully diverted our attention from the real problems of indiscriminant and increased herbicide use and the introduction of artificially genetically modified turf grass varieties within the European Golf Course Industry.

As Charles Darwin pointed out over 150 years ago, natural selection over time is a principal vector of evolutionary change. Human selection, in the form of regular use of a herbicide on a weed population is a very efficient way of evolving weeds that are resistant to that herbicide. Use of genetically modified Glyphosate resistant strains of agricultural plant species and the concomitant regular use of the herbicide itself, have resulted in a worrying increase in the numbers of herbicide resistant weeds, causing declines in agricultural yields and financial returns, over hundreds of thousands of acres in the USA.

During the past twenty years, the European Golf Industry has been criticised by environmentalists for the "excessive" use of agro-chemicals on golf courses. The response by the European Golf Industry (the golfers, the green-keepers and the golf architects) has been to investigate the use of agro-chemicals, to help educate golf course professionals as to how to

minimise their use, to educate golfers to accept more environmentally friendly golf courses, and to create monitoring and accreditation systems that encourage more environmentally sensitive and sustainable maintenance programmes. These efforts have met with a degree of success that only a decade ago many thought unlikely.

The development by one of the worlds largest agro-chemical companies of genetically modified herbicide resistant turf grass species marketed for golf course use can have only one objective: increasing the sales to golf courses of its own herbicide - Roundup. Planting Roundup resistant turf grass species can only imply the increased use of Glyphosate on golf courses. Otherwise, why bother planting Roundup "Ready" species? (Translation from Monsantero into English - "Ready" means "Resistant"). It is worth noting that the patent on Glyphosate, (the active ingredient of Roundup), expired a couple of years ago, and Monsanto are vigorously pursuing any means of increasing sales - hence their amenity turf grass Roundup Ready product line. Over time, not only will regular use of Roundup create resistance in existing weed species on golf courses; the slow but inevitable dispersal of Roundup Ready turf grass into adjacent farmland will create a new Glyphosate resistant agricultural weed - Roundup Ready Bent.

There is already growing doubt and increased wariness concerning the use of GM food crops that surely merit the application of the precautionary principle. Whilst there may be a few arguments which allow us to ignore that principle to justify genetic manipulations in the field of medicine, the same is simply just not true for amenity turfgrass. Given the present state of public sensitivity and scientific uncertainty there can be no reasonable justification for using artificially genetically modified turfgrass on Europe's golf courses. By doing so, we simply give the environmental opponents of golf course developments yet another Roundup Ready-made "GM" argument to further oppose golf course developments.

Increasing herbicide use, aggravating relations with environmentalists through the use of artificially genetically modified turf grass varieties and possibly creating a new agricultural weed goes against all that the golf industry has been trying to achieve over the past few years. Whether Monsanto likes it or not these are undesirable options for the European golf course industry.

The insensitivity of large American Trans-national chemical corporations is legend. (Remember how Union Carbide handled its "7000 dead and still counting" industrial disaster in Bhopal?) Over recent years notably in Brazil, India, US and Canada Monsanto's methods in the

development, marketing and/or distribution of GM food crops and agro-chemicals can best be described as ethically unsound and environmentally reckless. Whether justified or not, Monsanto has gained a reputation for authoritarian manipulation, corporate greed, and technical misinformation. In recent years, even senior Wall Street analysts from Lehman Bros. perceived the company as having "been optimistic on the borderlines of lying"

In Monsanto's defence, their propaganda man, Mr Combes quotes de Tocqueville, one of France's more liberal "left of centre" thinkers of the 19th century. This seems a cynical choice of sponsor for an American Trans-national of Monsanto's enormous stature and alarming reputation. Given Monsanto's cavalier attitude towards the environment a more appropriate quote from another famous European might be: "Die breite Masse eines Volkes... fällt einer grossen Lüge leichter zum Opfer als einer kleinen." Roughly translated this means that the mass of the people will sooner believe a big lie than a small one. And when it came to distorting reality Mister Hitler knew what he was talking about.

Yours sincerely
Jeremy Pern MSc, Golf Course Architect
Chairman Environmental Committee,
Council Member - European Institute of Golf Course Architects.

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SPORTS TURF SERVICES
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OR

R. & K. KENSETT
Surrey, England
☎ +44 (01883) 342632
email: info@kensettsports.co.uk