

# The conversion of an "agri-manager"

Had it not been for the accident on 27 April 2004, Paul François would undoubtedly have continued to work as a good soldier of the agro-industry. Back then, this ordinary man, who was soon to become the symbol of the fight against the pesticide industry in France, was not yet 40, but he was already in charge of a farm of over 240 hectares. In every regard he fit the mould of the typical post-Second World War farmer. Born into a Charentais family of cereal growers, supporters of the powerful agricultural trade union FNSEA, Paul François carried out intensive farming that was dependent on chemicals and could produce large volumes at low cost.

"Like everyone in my generation, and without even realising it, I became hooked on 'phytos'. Sales of these chemicals, which had already doubled every 10 years between 1945 and 1985, exploded in the 1990s", he writes in his revealing book, published at the end of 2017.

The young farmer was happy to take part in the training days sponsored by the producers of "phytosanitary products" – a term dreamt up by the industry to describe pesticides – and had no problem accepting their gifts: from the smallest (branded pens) to the more significant, such as his invitation to the Lido show in Paris along with 300 colleagues. At that time he liked being called an "agri-manager" (the linguistic inventiveness of the industry knows no bounds...), which he obviously thought was more flattering than "farmer" or, of course, "peasant".

Although he tried out various techniques to reduce his dependency on expensive "phytos", his reasons for doing so were purely financial, with little heed for health or the environment. Until that sunny day in April 2004.

On that early spring day, the sun was already beating down in the south-west. After having sprayed a corn field with Lasso,

a herbicide made by the US firm Monsanto, he left his huge crop sprayer sitting in the sun. When he went back to work, he thought it was empty, opened the 2 500-litre tank and put his head through the gaping hole. An intense heat hit him in the face and soon spread to his entire body.

Feeling nauseous and dizzy, and unable to speak without stammering, he went to his bedroom to rest. As the symptoms did not ease, his wife, who had trained as a nurse, drove him to casualty.

He thought that the sickness would be short-lived and could not have begun to imagine that that incident was to disrupt his life completely, in both negative and positive ways. The negatives include the intense headaches that, 14 years after being poisoned, still leave him bedridden for several days a month. It is possible to live with, and get used to, the physical ailments caused by chronic illnesses; the mental after-effects are more difficult to control.

Alongside his battle to get back to good health and continue to work, Paul François had to fight the medical world, the insurance companies and, of course, Monsanto, to have his illness recognised. His initial medical tests, notably an MRI, did not show up any abnormalities. The doctors put his chronic sickness down to overwork and stress. It was not until January 2005 that an EEG revealed "neurological anomalies".

"So I'm not mad", he writes, relieved after a doctor had even insinuated that he had been sniffing Lasso. From then on he became obsessed with a single cause: shining a light on the scientific proof of the link between Lasso and health problems.

He got to know two toxicologists, André Picot and Henri Pézerat, who helped him to untangle the issue: Lasso contains 43% alachlor, which is a weed killer, but also contains a solvent, monochlorobenzene. The scientists suggested that these health problems

corresponded to episodes when the solvent or the weed killer were being sprayed.

In February 2012, Paul François had his first victory, when a Lyon court ruled that Monsanto was responsible for poisoning him. Monsanto appealed and still maintains that strategy today, but the obstinate Charentais has held firm.

His book's appeal lies less in its revelations of the pressure applied by the multinational, which are scarcely surprising given the many recent press investigations into the St Louis firm, than in its telling of a personal journey.

The farmer does not ignore his own contradictions: like many farming families, the François family votes for the right and has for a long time cast, at best, an ironic view of the proponents of organic farming. Although he is fighting the "phyto" industry, the crop grower continues to use pesticides on his farm.

"Dad! You are fighting Monsanto but you are still using chemicals...", his two daughters cried one day. His meetings with activists and, above all, alternative farmers, which have shown him that organic farming can be financially viable, have convinced him to convert some of his farm to organic crops.

"I am no longer an agri-manager; I am once again a peasant (...) a word of which I have never been more proud", he concludes, finally at peace with himself.

— Denis Grégoire

## A Peasant Against Monsanto

Paul François (with Anne-Laure Barret), Éditions Fayard, 2017, 277 p.