

Farmers question what weed killers do to soil

By Stephanie Strom, New York Times

ALTON, Iowa – The puny, yellow corn stalks stand like weary sentries on one boundary of Dennis Von Arb's field here.

On a windy day this spring, his neighbor sprayed glyphosate on his fields, and some of the herbicide blew onto Mr. Von Arb's conventionally grown corn, killing the first few rows.

He's more concerned, though, about the soil. During heavy rains in the summer, the runoff from his neighbor's farm soaked his fields with glyphosate-laden water.

"Anything you put on the land affects the chemistry and biology of the land, and that's a powerful pesticide," Von Arb said.

But 20 miles down the road, Brad Vermeer brushes aside such concerns.

He grows "traited," or biotech, corn and soy on some 1,500 acres and estimates that his yield would fall by 20 percent if he switched to conventional crops and stopped using glyphosate, known by brand names like Roundup and Buccaneer.

In short, it is just too profitable to give up.

"Local agronomists are starting to say we have to get away from Roundup," Vermeer said. "But they're going to have to show me that conventional genetics can produce the same income."

The local differences over glyphosate are feeding the long-running debate over biotech crops, which currently account for roughly 90 percent of the corn, soybeans and sugar beets grown

in the United States.

While regulators and many scientists say biotech crops are no different from their conventional cousins, others worry that they are damaging the environment and human health. The battle is being waged at the polls, with ballot initiatives to require labeling of genetically modified foods; in courtrooms, where lawyers want to undo patents on biotech seeds; and on supermarket shelves containing products promoting conventionally grown ingredients.

Now, some farmers are taking a closer look at their soil.

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