For What the Fork?!, a collaboration by Making Contact, The Progressive/Center for Media and Democracy, Earth Island Journal, Grist, and Cascadia Times

This unusual collaboration of five outlets brought national attention to a critical and complex issue: the relationship between pesticides, genetically modified (GMO) crops, and corporate money in politics.

Brought together by their joint membership in the Media Consortium, Making Contact, The Progressive/CMD, Earth Island Journal, and Grist decided to pool their resources to pursue the story of how big agricultural firms develop experimental pesticide-ready genetically modified seed crops on Kaua‘i, the impact the pesticide use related to that crop has on the people and environment of Kaua‘i, and the influence the industry’s money has on politics in Hawai’i.

Editors from the outlets chose Paul Koberstein, a well-known award-winning environmental reporter and editor of Cascadia Times, to go to Kaua‘i to pursue an on-the-ground investigation. He was guided by Maureen Nandini Mitra, managing editor of Earth Island Journal, and Mike Ludwig, reporter with Truthout, who both had previously traveled to Kauai under Media Consortium grants.

Koberstein produced extraordinary investigative reporting, finding that the annualized pounds-per-acre usage of the seven most toxic pesticides on Kaua‘i was greater, on average, than in all but four states: Florida, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Indiana. In addition, Koberstein documented the hazards posed by this pesticide use to the unique flora and fauna endemic to the island and the coral reefs just off its shores. Mitra followed up her own reporting with a companion piece to Koberstein’s focusing on the feasibility of alternatives to highly concentrated and industrialized farming.

Meanwhile, Rebekah Wilce, reporter at PRWatch.org and The Progressive magazine, followed up on an earlier report on the corporate agricultural industry’s influence on Oregon’s local regulation of GMOs by digging deep into the campaign contributions and lobbying of Monsanto, Syngenta, Dow, DuPont, and Bayer and their trade groups in Hawai‘i. She found that Monsanto, Bayer, Syngenta, DuPont Pioneer, and several associated trade groups spent over $50,000 lobbying the state legislature from January through April 2014, as legislators considered bills to override county laws regulating GMO and pesticide use. She also found that Monsanto, Syngenta, Dow, DuPont, Bayer, associated trade groups, and their lobbyists and employees contributed over $700,000 to state and county candidates from November 2006 through December 2013.

To complement these investigative pieces, Making Contact produced a five-part radio series foregrounding the work of the other reporters. The segments featured the day to day struggles of organic farmers, a scientific explanation on the dangers of pesticides from Pesticide Action Network Senior Scientist [Marcia Ishii-Eiteman](http://wtfcorporations.com/2014/06/transcript-pan-scientist/), and producer Andrew Stelzer’s coverage from Jackson County, Oregon, where farmers were battling to ban transgenic crops.

All of the outlets worked together to synchronize their editorial schedules and their promotion of the content. In addition to co-publishing the content on a joint microsite, [wtfcorporations.com](http://www.wtfcorporations.com), the outlets held a background call on June 6, 2014 with organizers and activists active Kauai’s GMO fights and will host a public chat using Branch and Twitter on June 24, 2014 at 11am.

Outlets also generously cross-posted each other’s content:

* Earth Island Journal posted stories from The Progressive and Making Contact.
* PRWatch/The Progressive posted stories from Earth Island Journal and Grist.
* Grist posted stories from PR Watch/ The Progressive and Earth Island Journal.
* Truthout posted stories from Cascadia Times, Earth Island Journal and PRWatch/The Progressive.
* Several smaller news outlets, newsletters, and blogs are also starting to pick up and repost the articles.

The impact of this collaboration has been immediate.

1. Hashtags #BigAg and #wtfcorps took off. In addition to retweets, a significant number of tweeters attached other urls they believed would be of interest. We are still crunching numbers, but the number of “organic” tweets appears considerable.

2. Corporations on Kaua‘i and their PR firms began following our hashtags and started putting out misinformation in local Kaua‘i media in an attempt to counter our findings. From [The Garden Island](http://thegardenisland.com/news/local/report-pesticide-use-on-kauai-is-extensive/article_9b81a1a6-f858-11e3-8453-001a4bcf887a.html): “The industry, however, says the analysis ‘contains a plethora of inaccurate statements and false ‘facts.’”

3. Scientists have begun writing to our reporters providing additional information as well as asking for further information.

* Janette D. Sherman, MD (interested in the pesticidal compound Lorsban)
* Lynne Heilbrun, MPH (interested in the pesticide chlorpyrifos in baby teeth)

4. Activists on Kaua‘i have used the reports to finally have some firm data as documents in a court case …

These are impacts happening in just the first week after the collaboration! We expect to see even more long-term results following these reports.

Finally, this collaboration is not at an end. KCETLinkTV’s Earth Focus is planning a show devoted to the pesticide-ready GMO seed crop in Kaua‘i that will pick up and expand on the journalism already done; and Academy Award nominated filmmaker Scott Hamilton Kennedy (whose previous work includes *The Garden*, about urban farming in South Central Los Angeles) has contacted us re: is a documentary film. In addition, Koberstein, Mitra, Wilce, and Ludwig at Truthout plan follow-up pieces.