

Colombian Senate Debates Spraying of Drug Crops

The Colombian Senate is debating whether to continue aerial spraying of illicit crops. The policy was passed into law in 1986 and adopted by the National Narcotics Council (Colombia's drug control agency), but, according to some senators and other experts on the topic, it has not produced the desired results.

The debate was initiated by Congressmen Rafael Orduz and Juan Manuel Ospina, who argue that the spraying has not eradicated drug crops even in those areas that have been fumigated. In addition, Orduz maintains that the chemicals have affected the environment as well as human health. "They are spraying small plots belonging to poor people and indigenous groups who have historically lived in remote areas, causing the population to become displaced to big cities," he told *El Tiempo* newspaper.

Colombia's ombudsman has also received complaints from people who claim to have gotten sick from the spraying and say that it has polluted natural water sources. And Environmental Minister Juan Mayr has taken a firm stance on the topic, criticizing the nation's drug policy as lacking adequate environmental protections.

Those who insist that the chemicals are safe include Steven John, of the Heritage Foundation, and Justice Minister Rómulo González. They argue that numerous scientific tests prove the safety of the substances being used. "The real damage is caused by the insecticides used in the cultivation of coca and opium poppies," González claims. In response, coca growers and environmental groups argue that the aerial spraying campaign is using much higher concentrations of chemicals than those tested.

One proposed solution to the debate is going back to manual eradication of illicit crops. Critics of this plan say that manual eradication is slow and unreliable, and that in many cases the crops are simply replanted. During the Senate debate, González stated that the government's policy is to continue controlled aerial spraying in combination with manual eradication.

Regardless of the preferred method of eradication, cultivation of illegal drugs will continue as long as demand for them persists. And with them will come the other problems associated with the illegal drug trade-economic distortions, corruption and violence in the countries that produce them.