

Erin Brockovich called out on glyphosate

By Barb Glen

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The fight against glyphosate is gaining famous allies. | File photo

U.S. researcher says famous environmentalist is part of a movement that is 'working against agricultural chemistry'

Erin Brockovich has a new cause.

The legal clerk and environmental activist built a case against California's Pacific Gas and Electric Company in 1993 and secured compensation for people made ill by the company's chemical use. Her success was immortalized in a movie starring Julia Roberts.

Now Brockovich has targeted glyphosate.

That isn't sitting well with Kevin Folta, a horticultural researcher and University of Florida professor who regularly speaks about farming practices including biotechnology.

At his Dec. 12 keynote speech at the Farming Smarter conference, Folta praised Brockovich's efforts with PG & E, but took issue with a Dec. 6 Brockovich column published in The Guardian.

"She is widely regarded as somebody who is a warrior on behalf of the little guy, and someone who is working hard to protect the environment," Folta said.

"(But) it turns out that Erin Brockovich is really representing — this is the irony here — a very well-financed, a very organized set of folks who now are working against agricultural chemistry."

Folta said Brockovich is associated with the law firm Weitz and Luxenberg, which advertises its willingness to pursue lawsuits focused on "the dangers of exposure to Monsanto's Roundup weed killer for farmers, farm workers, landscapers and home gardeners," according to its website.

Using social media to talk about agriculture is a familiar topic at farm meetings, but Folta added his view that farmers should engage the large segment of the population who no longer know what to believe when it comes to food production and food safety.

That means using social media to converse with people who farmers may not encounter in any other venue.

"We're very good at speaking with each other," said Folta.

“It’s important to preach to the choir because sometimes even the choir needs a bit more information, but we’re not reaching into the congregation of skeptics, the people that view science and farming as things that are potentially harming their families.”

However, getting the message across requires that farmers first establish trust. Facts don’t matter until that trust is established, said Folta. Once that occurs, people will listen to what is said and a conversation, rather than a lecture or an argument, can ensue.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle spoke of modes of persuasion called pathos, ethos and logos. Pathos refers to emotions and empathy, logos to logic and facts, and ethos to ethics and character.

Ethos “is where this room has this in buckets,” Folta said to the several hundred farmers in attendance. “We have ethos. Our ethics, our background, our competence... why we decide to make a living by feeding people safe and nutritious food, using the proper inputs, being mindful of resources because it’s land that we need to protect to hand it to the next generation ... that’s the stuff that we need to talk about if we’re going to change their minds.”

Folta said farmers should “lead with your ethics” when discussing farming methods and food safety, and talk about shared values.

Blogging, making podcasts and using Twitter and Facebook can be effective, although not necessarily pleasant, given potential arguments and backlash.

“Its not always fun and games. There’s a certain level of decorum that we need to maintain,” said Folta.