# Deadline for companies to hand over data

*After some hard questions from Pesticide Action Network UK, the UK government's Pesticide Safety Directorate has launched a survey to find out how much information on health ill-effects is held by agrochemical companies. So far, the companies' response has been poor.*

Pesticide companies are failing to hand over details of people made ill by their products to the Pesticides Safety Directorate (PSD). They have been under a legal obligation to submit immediately any new information on the adverse effects of their products since 31 March 1998.

Officials at the PSD – which regulates pesticide use in the UK – have conducted a questionnaire survey of the companies, to collect reports of complaints of ill-health made in 2002[1]. The response was so poor by the deadline last year that the PSD has had to send out a reminder to the companies asking again to supply the information.

Originally, a letter was sent to the companies in September last year[2]. Only 18 companies replied, but PSD declined to say which they were. Two months later, last year, another letter went out from PSD[3].

The exercise is important because for some time there has been concern that the adverse effects of pesticides are not being fully reported. The PSD survey aimed to find out from industry sources whether claims that illness caused by pesticides is under-reported are valid. PSD has said the exercise might have to be repeated.

## Regulators act

Scientists on the Advisory Committee on Pesticides (ACP) – which advises Ministers on the safety, quality and efficacy of products – have already considered the issue and concluded that agrochemical companies have many reports from customers of alleged adverse health effects. To evaluate this information, PSD asked the companies to submit details of anyone reporting ill health to them from using their products during 2002.

PSD suggested in their approach to the companies that the information expected would be 'over and above' that already required from approval holders under the Food and Environment Protection Act 1985 and the Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986. This and subsequent legislation imposes an on-going obligation to report adverse effects on human health (as well as on the environment and crop damage) and '… to submit immediately any new information on the potentially dangerous effects of a product or of residues of an active substance contained in a product, on human or animal health, ground water or the environment.' However in the reply to a Parliamentary Question, on 9 March, from the Countess of Mar, the government confirmed that 'The questionnaire is aimed at ensuring that the obligations already set out under the Food and Environmental Protection Act and the Plant Protection Products Regulations are fully complied with.'

PAN *UK* is concerned companies are keeping complaints secret. Alison Craig, the PEX project coordinator for PAN *UK*, said the companies could potentially be breaking the law by withholding adverse effects data from PSD. 'The information is in two categories,' Alison explained. 'There are laboratory studies in the grey literature and reports from the companies' own studies of particular active ingredients. There is no question that these should be submitted.' Then there are complaints to the companies from the public. 'The question is whether you classify these as adverse incidents,' said Alison. 'The PSD implies in their guidance that they do not count until there are enough of them to indicate a pattern of adverse effects.'

At a presentation to the Medical and Toxicology Panel of the ACP last April, PAN *UK* alerted regulators to the possibility that many of these adverse effects are reported to the companies and go no further. Aware of the ACP's concern, the PSD organised its survey. 'We are concerned that people may be contacting the companies with their symptoms but this information is not making its way through to the PSD,' Alison explained.

*References*
*1. Questionnaire on possible effects of pesticides on human health: www.pesticides.gov.uk/applicant/aahip/aahl0335.htm.*
*2. PSD, All approval holders letter, Number 30/2003 dated 10 September 2003 (deadline set 10 November 2003).*
*3. PSD, All approval holders letter, 35/2003 dated 17 December 2003 (deadline set 27 February 2004).*

# African organic cotton to Europe

*A gathering of 100 fashion designers, clothing retailers and representatives of African organic cotton farmers met at the 04 Cotton Conference in Hamburg to discuss how to develop the organic cotton market in Europe. The conference exceeded expectations, as sales deals were struck between participants.*

For the first time, Senegalese organic cotton farmers can sell their products to Europe, benefiting from a more secure and profitable market. Marks & Spencer's launched their fair trade organic cotton yoga range at the fashion show, a highlight of the conference. But the evening wear kimono designed by Aissa Dionne of Senegal stole the show.

The 100 delegates at the *European Conference on Developing the Organic Cotton Market* came from large and small companies, public interest groups and institutions in Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America and the US. An important topic was the social and environmental benefits of organic cotton. To the thousands of small-scale farmers in dry areas of Africa who depend on cotton production for an income, organic cotton offers a good livelihood.

Organic cotton offers an attractive, high quality product to environmentally conscious European consumers. Conventional cotton uses many harmful pesticides that can poison, sometimes fatally, the farming communities exposed to them, and the products can cause long-term damage to the environment and to biodiversity. The conference helped retailers, suppliers and farmer representatives meet one to one.

The fashion show featured the latest designs and trends in organic cotton clothing from many companies. The Marks & Spencer's yoga collection, manufactured by the Indian fair trade organic company Agrocel, was well-received. Young designers from Germany and the UK showed their collections, including recent graduate of the London College of Fashion, Samuel J. Yeung, whose collection was 100% organic.

The conference was organised by PAN Germany, PAN *UK* and the Beninese group OBEPAB, under a joint programme called *Fair dialogue – mutual benefit: responsible cotton stewardship*. (***SF***)

*More information: www.OrganicCottonEurope.net*

# Dangerous herbicide in water at illegal levels

*Pesticide Action Network UK has written urgently to health chiefs in the Newcastle region to demand action over a 'tumour-promoting' chemical polluting the water of 600,000 people.*

Isoproturon is in drinking water above the legal limit, but Northumbrian Water's treatment works to remove it will not be finished for another three years. In the meantime, levels of the chemical are exceeding the interim limit the company has been set.

'Isoproturon is a carcinogenic tumour-promoting pesticide[1], and we are very concerned about long-term exposure,' says Alison Craig of PAN *UK*. 'We are especially worried about its possible impacts on children under ten who could have been exposed to it all their lives, even in the womb.'

'We have asked the health authorities to support our call for a ban on isoproturon, and for bottled water to be provided. We have asked them to look at cancer figures, particularly in children.'

Northumbrian Water has found isoproturon in the public water supply at levels above the European Commission limit of 0.1 micrograms per litre since 1995. Contamination levels of private water supplies are unknown.

The areas currently affected in the North of England are served by the following works: Killingworth, Fenham, Newcastle City Centre, Low Service, Hillhead, Wylam Booster, Carr Hill, Beacon Lough, Whickham, Birney Hill, Byker, Harlow Hill, Stannington, Blyth, North Tyneside and Whitley Bay.

According to Northumbrian Water, the drinking water of around 600,000 people will be contaminated with isoproturon until the new treatment works at Horsley and Whittle Dene are completed at the end of 2006. The company claims that, under the EC Drinking Water Directive, an authorised departure from some standards for drinking water quality is allowed 'providing there is no risk to public health.'

### Letter asks for measures

In response, PAN *UK* has written to Dr Stephen Singleton, Medical Director of the Strategic Health Authority, and to the National Poisons Information Service, Newcastle. The letter asks Dr Singleton to introduce a number of measures to protect public health. These include the provision of bottled water by Northumbrian Water until the treatment works have been completed, especially for those groups most at risk, and to conduct a public information campaign to ensure people know about the pollution.

Isoproturon is a widely used herbicide for weeds in cereals. The months of highest use are October and November. It has been known for years that, because it is highly mobile in soil, isoproturon is prone to contaminate water.

*1. European Commission, Review report for the active substance isoproturon, SANCO/3045/99 - final, 12 March 2002.*

# EPA sued on worker protection

Lawyers have sued the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for failing to protect workers and the environment properly from the use of toxic pesticides.

They claimed the EPA has continued to allow the use of two toxic pesticides, azinphos-methyl (AZM) and phosmet, despite data showing the dangers of exposure to the chemicals.

Both are organophosphate pesticides and are neurotoxins because they can attack the nervous system. According to the lawsuit, one of the five plaintiffs – Sea Mar community health centres, based in Seattle – has treated patients with headaches, vomiting, disorientation and other symptoms of pesticide poisoning. It is estimated that about 30,000 workers in Washington's apple industry are potentially at risk from pesticide exposure.

In 2001, Washington state had the highest use of AZM among states and was third nationwide in the use of phosmet, according to lawyers acting for a number of farmworkers' groups.

'The EPA knew there were unacceptable risks, yet went ahead and decided during 2001 to register the pesticide … ignoring its own data which showed how to produce apples, for example, at a profit in a way which didn't poison people,' said Grant Cope, a lawyer for Earthjustice, a local legal group which concentrates on environmental issues.

Bill Dunbar, an EPA spokesman, did not want to comment in detail on the lawsuit. But he said the EPA had begun to phase out pesticides from some uses, and continued to address public concern through compliance with the federal Food Quality Protection Act.

*The Agribusiness Examiner, issue 318, January 15, 2004.*

# Companies must change wording

Four companies which either sell or use pesticides in Canada have been ordered to change the way they advertise their products.

Bayer, Syngenta, Weed Man and Bobby Lawn Care have been told not to use words such as 'safe' or 'government approved' in future.

Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Authority (PMRA) told the companies to amend their advertisements after Earth Action, an environmental group, filed a petition. Sharon Labchuk from the group enclosed examples of promotional material from the four companies with the petition.

'They're using language that's illegal for pesticide advertising in Canada,' said Ms Labchuk. 'They're saying that their pesticides are safe, that government has approved them and that they are somehow sanctioned by government.'

Neil McTiernan, from the PMRA, said the company's words were misleading. Derrick Rozdeba, a communications manager for Bayer Crop Science, said his company had responded to the ruling, and was reviewing all its promotional material to ensure that it wasn't breaking the law.

*Coalition Against Bayer Dangers, www.CBGnetwork.org*

# Workers blame Agent Orange

Dozens of Australian agriculture workers were exposed to a toxic chemical used in Agent Orange during a controversial weed-spraying programme.

Now they are demanding compensation after the state government admitted that the health risks were covered up for two decades.

Up to 36 premature deaths have been linked to the herbicide, which was used in the remote Kimberley region of Western Australia between 1975 and 1985.

Survivors say they have suffered health problems, including blindness, cancer and respiratory illnesses, and some have children who were born with deformities.

The Western Australia Government, after years of resistance, ordered an inquiry which recommended last year that compensation be paid to the men who worked for its Agricultural Protection Board.

But the inquiry said it would be difficult to prove that their illnesses were directly caused by exposure to the herbicide, 2,4,5-T.

State politicians then referred the issue to a panel of scientists, whose findings were due to be published as Pesticides News went to press. The herbicide has been linked with health problems for decades.

*http://news.independent.co.uk/world/australasia/story.jsp?story=492802*

# Workers poisoned in Colombia

About 200 Colombian flower workers have been poisoned by pesticides at Flores Aposentos north of Bogotá.

The workers, primarily women, were taken by ambulance from the worksite in Sopó to five surrounding hospitals, all with symptoms consistent with pesticide poisoning.

Untraflores, a Colombian labour organization, reported that some workers were ill for days, and called on people to contact Colombian officials asking for more information on the causes of the poisoning, and improved worker protections[1].

The poisoning incident took place in November 2003. The affected workers experienced symptoms such as strong headaches, nausea, swelling, rashes, diarrhoea, and sores inside and around the mouth shortly after arriving to work. Untraflores reported that the company did not seek medical help for the workers until later in the morning, when dozens of workers began fainting. Twenty ambulances carried workers to a hospital in Sopó, as well as hospitals in three surrounding towns and a clinic in Bogotá.

A childcare facility near the Flores Aposentos facility was also evacuated. Approximately 60 children were waiting to be picked up by their parents in front of the centre as the Flores Aposentos workers were carried away in ambulances.

The pesticide involved in the poisoning has not been disclosed. Colombian news sources speculated on the causes of the accident, which remain unexplained[2]. Untraflores reported a large pesticide application had taken place the evening before and speculated that the morning sun may have caused chemicals to volatilize. Workers say the company called workers back to work later in the day on 25 November, despite a strong chemical smell in the greenhouses.

Within days of the poisoning, Colombian health officials announced an investigation. Untraflores asked people to contact Colombian officials, asking for public information on the chemicals involved and the long-term consequences to the workers. PAN North America has joined the International Labor Rights Fund to circulate the Untraflores appeal[3].

*1. Ultraflores, 3 December 2003, Demand an investigation of the poisoning of hundreds of flower workers in Colombia, www.untraflores.netfirms.com*
*2. El Tiempo, 22 November 2003, http://eltiempo.terra.com.co/naci/cund/2003-11-22/ARTICULO-WEB-_NOTA_INTERIOR-1433436.html*
*3. PANUPS, Floriculture: Pesticides, Worker Health & Codes of Conduct, June 12, 2002, www.panna.org/resources/panups/panup_20020612.dv.html*

# Scottish salmon tops contaminated pollutants list

New evidence has found that salmon produced in Scottish farms is the most contaminated salmon in Europe and North America.

Scientists publishing in the journal *Science* showed that Scottish farmed salmon is so contaminated with PCBs, dioxins, dieldrin and toxaphene that no more than three meals a year of the fish could be recommended.

On the other hand, wild salmon could be safely consumed in as many as eight meals each month, or twice a week. Using a cancer risk analysis developed by the United States Environmental Protection Agency, scientists from the University of Michigan, the University of Indiana, Cornell University and the State University of New York found that '... consumption of farmed Atlantic salmon may pose risks that detract from the beneficial effects of fish consumption.'

As part of the study, more than 700 salmon samples were bought from wholesalers and retailers in each of the world's important salmon farming regions and from retailers in London, Edinburgh, Paris, Frankfurt, Oslo, New York, Washington DC, Seattle, Chicago, New Orleans, Denver, Boston, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Toronto and Vancouver,

'Farmed salmon fillets purchased from supermarkets in Frankfurt, Edinburgh, Paris, London and Oslo were generally the most contaminated,' said the *Science* article. 'Most of the salmon sold in European stores comes from European farms, which produce the more contaminated salmon.'

Don Staniford, managing director of the Salmon Farm Protest Group, said the *Science* study clearly showed that Scottish farmed salmon was the most contaminated farmed salmon on sale anywhere in the world. 'Given the cocktail of chemicals, artificial colourings and contaminants, Scottish farmed salmon should surely carry a government health warning rather than being sold as a safe, healthy and nutritious food.'

*RA Hitesat, JA Foran, DO Carpenter, MC Hamilton, BA Knuthand and SJ Schwager, Global Assessment of Organic Contaminants in Farmed Salmon, Science, 9 January 2004, 303: 226-229.*

# Garden pesticides in UK sewage works

Residents are being asked to help after a dangerous insecticide used in a range of products polluted the River Wey in Surrey.

The Environment Agency publicised the pollution after a local landowner contacted them at the beginning of summer in 2002.

The Agency carried out tests and found the chemical chrotamiton, a scabicide used in nit shampoos, scabies treatments and a range of other household products. Their evidence suggested the pollution was coming from a sewage treatment plant, as this was where the damage in the Wey had begun.

## Agency took more samples

Last year, there was another incident. The same landowner noted that the level of invertebrates – which he monitors to ensure the river quality remains high for fish – had fallen again.

The Agency took more samples and found the insecticide chlorpyrifos at or below publicised lethal levels coming from the sewage treatment plant. No chlorpyrifos was found upstream. In theory, the agency said, chlorpyrifos should have been removed by the treatment works because it is hydrolised easily, sticks to sludge and should not have survived processing. Agency scientists estimated that about five grams, or half a teaspoon, a day was escaping from the treatment plant.

## Small amounts have effects

Colin Chiverton from the Agency said: 'People are often not aware that even tiny amounts of some chemicals can have a devastating effect on the environment. Each and every one of us can help to reduce the risk of pollution by disposing of pesticides and other chemicals carefully.'

Anyone with doubts about how to dispose of chemicals used in their garden or home can telephone their local authority. The Environment Agency has a 24 hour help line on 0845 9333 111 for further advice. PAN UK has a database showing a map of the country which allows users to click on the relevant region and find where they can dispose of used home and garden pesticides. This is at www.pesticidedisposal.org

*'Pesticide Risk in the River Wey,' Environment Agency, 6 August 2003.*