

More poisonings in Chile

Under a law which became effective in October 2004, suspected pesticide poisonings have to be reported to the authorities in Chile. Publication of the documented cases by the regional ministries for health therefore enables campaigners and decision-makers to get a better understanding of the scale of the health effects and particular problem pesticides. Data from 2005 show that 785 cases were notified, of which 2% were fatal and 39% hospitalised, according to the report of the national network for epidemiological vigilance of the ministry of health. The 19 fatalities recorded were linked to the active ingredients methomyl, methamidophos, sulphur, dimethoate, diazinon, aldicarb, coumaphos and carbofuran.

Most poisonings affected rural peasant communities, especially seasonal workers, whether applying and mixing pesticides or entering treated areas before re-entry period. Most poisoning incidents were related to WHO Class Ia and Ib compounds. The most serious offender was methamidophos, linked to 97 cases of which 3% were fatal. In second and third place were chlorpyrifos and alpha-cypermethrin, while glyphosate and cypermethrin were responsible for 35 and 31 cases respectively and the plant growth regulator gibberellic acid for 25 cases. Methomyl and tetramethrin were each related to 24 cases. Sulphur fungicide was responsible for 22 cases, 5% of which were fatal, followed by azinphos methyl (20 cases) and dimethoate (19 cases).

Paraquat was identified as the cause for 18 incidents, 17% of which were fatal, the highest incidence of lethal exposure. WHO continues to class this herbicide as only Class II 'moderately hazardous', while the products are classified as Ib in Chile. PAN internationally is campaigning for a global ban on this chemical and its use in developing countries like Chile can never be justifi-

fied as it requires protective measures which are rarely met: use of protective clothing, adequate washing facilities, non-leaking spray equipment and low exposure.

Soil treatment caused 14 poisonings in the case of aldicarb, seven for carbofuran and six for methyl bromide, a substance to be phased out globally under the Montreal protocol to protect the ozone layer.

In 15% cases, the product responsible could not be identified. In 37%, more than one person was affected in the same incident. PAN Chile estimates that these figures represent a considerable underestimate since records show that for every single officially notified case, another four were documented but did not enter the official statistics.

Latest data for January through February 2006 from the ministry's Vigilance Network for Acute Pesticide Poisonings (REVEP) reveal 175 incidents and eight fatalities, with 55% of cases involving farm workers. The official statistics correspond to a poisoning incidence rate of one per 100,000 people. The most affected regions are those with industrial-scale farming and 55% of cases were from occupational exposure, with 49% of cases requiring hospitalisation. Organophosphates and carbamates can be linked to 68% of cases, followed by pyrethroids. Eight cases of mass poisoning took place, 71% in the workplace, followed by non-occupational accidents including in the home and bystander exposure to pesticide drift. Intentional harm was not suspected in 72% of the total cases.

However, REVEP data does not make public the brand names of products responsible, a major omission for transparency and action.

Source: PAN Latin America website <http://www.rap-al.org/v2/>

Aerial fumigation – Ecuador's doctors protest to the UN

The Ecuadorean Medical Federation and the Medical College of Pichincha recently sent a formal letter of concern to the special mission of the United Nations in relation to the continued aerial spraying of herbicides on the border with Colombia, carried out in US-funded attempts to stop the cultivation of coca. The doctors describe the herbicide glyphosate used in the operations as 'poison' and a 'chemical weapon' with serious consequences for human and environmental health. Their assertions are based on repeated, independent studies carried out by numerous scientists in different latitudes. The letter argues strongly that the burden of proof should lie with the fumigation proponents to prove that their methods

are safe, rather than for Ecuador's citizens and medical community to prove the toxicity of glyphosate and the other ingredients applied. The letter points out that 'The history of all the toxic aerial campaigns carried out with similar aims in Vietnam, Cambodia, Africa and Latin America provides evidence of the human, biological and environmental defects generated by these inhuman policies. How many deformed children, sterile women and invalided old people still roam the cities of the world carrying the stigma of these acts, in which they never participated or were to blame.'

Source: *Enlace Bulletin of PAN Latin America* no. 72, p. 9, 2006

UK consults on food standards

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) is seeking views on draft guidelines for minimising pesticide residues in tomatoes, potatoes, pears, apples and cereals. This move is part of a broader initiative being carried out 'in response to consumer preference for minimal pesticide residues in food'. While PAN UK's analysis suggests that the crops targeted are some of the most important UK-grown crops for residues, similar action should be taken on others such as strawberries and cucumbers.

In their introduction the FSA state that 'food containing residues up to the legal Maximum Residue Level (MRL) is not harmful', that current residue levels are 'safe', and that their aim to reduce residues is to meet 'consumer preference'. However, they are somewhat misguided. Even the UK government's Advisory Committee on Pesticides (ACP) do not use the term 'safe' in reference to pesticides preferring to talk about 'acceptable level of risk'. In addition, many MRLs are set at levels that could result in consumption above the allowable daily intake (ADI) or the acute reference dose (ARfD).

The stated aims of the five crop guides are to provide information on pesticide residue minimisation, to inform producers and suppliers, and to assist the food industry to deliver existing pesticide minimisation techniques. It is unfortunate that they do not also aim to reduce the levels and frequency of pesticide residues detected on the five crops.

The five 'pesticide residue minimisation crop guides' contain a wealth of interesting and useful information. Hopefully the consultation will ensure a broad consensus leading to realistic advice that is new and appropriate for a wide range of circumstances.

However, the level of detail provided is not great and would be unlikely to enable a grower to make changes without seeking further information. And there are a number of issues left unaddressed: for example, the use of pesticides for cosmetic quality, improving storage ability and shelf life is not questioned. Changing customer expectations (such as for blemish-free and year-round availability) may be another route for reducing pesticide use.

The guides are also aimed only at UK-grown food, which only accounts for part of our consumption, and so, at best can only achieve a partial reduction in residues. The guides underestimate the work that some retailers already do to ensure their overseas suppliers reduce residue levels, and there ought to be scope for knowledge transfer activities between retailers and suppliers.

The guides contain little reference to pest management techniques used by organic growers, and since all five crops can be grown successfully without pesticides, it seems probable that their experience would be valuable. In addition, there is too much focus on MRL's which are effectively 'trading standards' with little relevance to consumers.