

# UK government rejects recommendations to protect public health

*In July this year, the government published its response to the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution's report 'Crop Spraying and the health of residents and bystanders'. Campaigners have been shocked by the government's flat rejection of the major recommendations. Clare Butler Ellis gives PAN UK's reaction.*

The government's response<sup>1</sup> to the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (RCEP) report<sup>2</sup> 'Crop Spraying and the Health of Residents and Bystanders' was published on 20 July, with an accompanying press release suggesting that the majority of the recommendations were accepted and stating that the 'The Government recognises the clearly genuine concerns of some residents and bystanders about the spraying of pesticides. Government can, and will, do more to address these concerns.'

Examination of the published response, however, shows very clearly that the crucial recommendations that would begin to address the concerns of residents and bystanders have either not been accepted, or have been accepted in principle but left to the industry to implement through voluntary measures. There is little in the response that will reassure those whose health has been compromised by exposure to pesticides.

The most serious rejection is the need for additional precaution. This leaves the government in a completely illogical position – they accept that they cannot rule out a link between chronic ill health and pesticide exposure yet they believe further research is unnecessary, improved surveillance might be considered only at some point in the future, and precautionary measures are unjustified.

In coming to this conclusion, the government has relied heavily on its existing advisory committees. The Advisory Committee on Pesticides (ACP) in particular came in for some heavy criticism by the RCEP which, not surprisingly, it rebutted vigorously in its own response. There seems little point in asking the RCEP for an independent opinion of the work of these government committees if any differences of opinion would automatically be rejected. The implication is that the government sees its own committees as infallible and there are no safeguards for their potential mistakes. The need to take account of the full range of views within the committees was identified by the RCEP: perhaps just as importantly, the government needs to take account of the full range of views, including other scientists, outside the committees. The RCEP attempted this, resulting in its more

precautionary approach.

The decision to commission research in order to improve the exposure model for residents is very welcome<sup>3</sup>. However, there are concerns about the intention to include the agrochemical industry in project discussions, when members of the public, campaigners or NGOs are not currently invited. This seems inconsistent with the government's intention to ensure that the exposure model is developed in a 'transparent and demonstrably robust manner to give the public greater confidence in the approval system for pesticides.'

There was considerable publicity over the RCEP's recommendation for a temporary buffer zone next to residential property. The five metre buffer zone proposed by the RCEP was thought by campaigners, particularly Georgina Downs of the UK Pesticide Campaign<sup>4</sup>, to be a wholly inadequate measure for reducing long term exposure of residents. Nevertheless, a statutory buffer zone of any size has been rejected by the government on the grounds that it would not be a 'proportionate response to the level of uncertainty surrounding the model for exposure'. It is of some concern that Professor Paul Miller, the scientist leading the project to revise the exposure model, believes that a statutory buffer zone is a necessary and proportionate measure to deal with exposure uncertainty<sup>5</sup>. He was not, however, consulted by the government on this issue<sup>6</sup> during its attempt 'to gain a properly balanced view'.

Since the government is refusing to take additional precautions on our behalf, public concerns can only begin to be allayed if we have the means by which we can take precautions for ourselves. Two important RCEP recommendations relate to the access of residents to information about pesticides used in their neighbourhood. The government's response suggests that it agrees that spray records should be made available to residents and bystanders and that prior notification of residents of pesticides usage is good practice, but this should not be made a statutory requirement. By making public access to spray records optional for farmers, only some residents will get the information they need to protect themselves.

This voluntary approach for protecting

people from pesticides is in reality no different from the current situation which has been proven not to work. There are existing voluntary measures (the Voluntary Initiative<sup>7</sup>) whose effect so far on reducing environmental impacts is unclear, although there have been changes in behaviour by some, but by no means all, pesticide users. The circumstances by which this happened were, however, quite different from those currently prevailing. Firstly, it was made clear by government that approved pesticides, even when used correctly, cause environmental problems. There has been no such clarity in the case of pesticides and public health. Secondly, there was the threat of a pesticide tax, which, as far as we are aware, has not been revived in relation to reducing public health impacts. Thus there is no obvious incentive for farmers to change their practice.

The proposals for the prior notification of spraying for residents appear to have been compromised by a highly flawed pilot study<sup>8</sup> and do not give much guidance to farmers wishing to notify neighbours. A central bureau will provide residents with historical spray records (contrary to the RCEP which advocated direct and immediate access) in 'circumstances where ... a dialogue is not appropriate or possible'. This seems inconsistent with the government's proposals for reducing exposure, which is 'through dialogue between residents and farmers to identify areas of concern and develop mutually agreeable solutions based on a common understanding of the issue.' If there are likely to be difficulties in merely passing information (which the farmer is required by law to keep) to a neighbour, then developing 'mutually agreeable solutions' in all circumstances seems an impossible fantasy.

After the publication of the response, PAN UK met Lord Rooker (the Defra minister with responsibility for pesticides) to put our views to him. He made it clear that he believes the voluntary approach will be more successful than attempting to introduce legislation, which could take significantly longer. He suggested that the success (or otherwise) of this would be assessed over a period of three to five years, although it was not clear what criteria could be used for such an assessment. Campaigners will have a continuing role to make sure any evidence of voluntary measures failing residents and bystanders is collected and brought to government's attention.

1. [www.defra.gov.uk/environment/rcep/pdf/rcepcropspray-response.pdf](http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/rcep/pdf/rcepcropspray-response.pdf)

2. [www.rcep.org.uk/cropspraying.htm](http://www.rcep.org.uk/cropspraying.htm)

3. *The development and validation of a Bystander and Residential Exposure Assessment Model (BREAM) (PS2005)*, [www.defra.gov.uk/science/default.htm](http://www.defra.gov.uk/science/default.htm)

4. [www.pesticidescampaign.co.uk](http://www.pesticidescampaign.co.uk)

5. Prof Paul Miller, *Farmers Weekly*, 2 June 2006

6. Prof Paul Miller, pers. comm.

7. *Voluntary Initiative*, [www.voluntaryinitiative.org.uk/Content/default.asp](http://www.voluntaryinitiative.org.uk/Content/default.asp)

8. *Pilot study on public notification of pesticide use*, ADAS, 2006,

[www.pesticides.gov.uk/approvals.asp?id=1875](http://www.pesticides.gov.uk/approvals.asp?id=1875)