

Pesticides: Points of Contention

By David Orton, environmentalist

Writing about pesticides for an audience of Nova Scotia physicians in a short article poses a number of problems. The subject matter is extremely contentious. The pesticide users – pulp and paper companies and other commercial forestry interest, agricultural bodies, the Nova Scotia Power Corporation, etc. – and the various provincial and federal regulatory bodies, all publicly deny that there is any problem with “responsible” pesticide use. We are told that pesticides – a generic term that includes herbicides, insecticides, fungicides, rodenticides, etc. – are manufactured according to high standards. We are also told that, in fact, Canada has the most “stringent” standards in the world. The modern economy, it is said, relies on pesticide use and, if the label instructions are followed, there is nothing to worry about. Pesticide users and the regulatory bodies see the opposition to pesticide use as emotional and, at most, as their opponents having a perceptual problem. Pesticide permits, which are needed for forest spraying, are sent to the Nova Scotia Department of Health for approval, and copies are then usually dispatched to the director of the local health unit in the area where the spraying will be carried out. While a few individual doctors have in the past spoken out against pesticide spraying, it is perhaps fair to say that the “profession” is seen as basically condoning the use of pesticides in Nova Scotia.

Another ‘problem’ is that there is not a uniform anti-pesticide movement and one oppositional viewpoint to pesticide use. As a product of this society, the movement reflects its various theoretical tendencies. An example is the crucial issue of how humans see their relationship to Nature – support or opposition to a human-centered world that treats as “pests” life forms which interfere with this use. If the anthropocentric view is accepted, then the main problem is not the use of pesticides, but whether pesticides are “safe.” However, the biocentric or deep ecology perspective sees humans as being on a basis of equality with other life forms and their ecosystems. Other species of animals and plants have intrinsic value in their own right and are not to be considered “resources” for human use. Humans, in the words of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, “have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.” Using pesticides to destroy other life forms to grow, say, Christmas trees or pulpwood, does not qualify as satisfying vital needs. The only appropriate use of the word “pest” could be reserved for the human species which has chemically contaminated the planet. The biocentric perspective sees pesticides as violating natural succession and the natural healing processes of the Earth, over and above any questions of toxicity. This perspective – support for the preservation of natural biodiversity and ecological processes – totally rejects all pesticide use.

The anti-pesticide movement is also divided over attitude towards the existing political and economic system. The mainstream trend works within the system and is happy to accept government funding of its work. Major efforts are directed at trying to get the “authorities” to exercise what are seen as their regulatory responsibilities. The political viewpoint is that capitalism can be made ecologically responsible. Anti-pesticide activists of this persuasion can spend considerable amounts of time participating in what are referred to as “multi-stakeholder” committees, normally dominated by supporters of pesticide use. The mainstream voice is the voice usually reflected in the media.

The minority trend opposes the existing political and economic system because it is viewed as being rooted in economic growth, the promotion of a consumerism without end as part of such growth, and, in the long term, an undermining of ecological sustainability. Pesticide use is seen as part of a commitment to economic goals, above environmental and human health concerns, and linked to the consumer-pitched appeal of “the perfect product”.

Organizing against the use of pesticides

I have worked with others in Nova Scotia, for about the last ten years, to oppose pesticide use in forestry, with some lesser focus on pesticides used on Christmas trees, blueberry fields, roadside spraying and power line spraying. Forest spraying is only one aspect of a pulpwood forestry policy in Nova Scotia – introduced legislatively in the late 1950s and early 1960s – which feeds the pulp and paper mills in the province. These mills pour out known and unknown environmental pollutants through effluent, air emission of particulates and gases like hydrogen sulphide and sulphur dioxide, and through sludge disposal. Pulp mills have particular environmental problems, e.g. the production of a vast array of organochlorine compounds as a spin-off from chlorine bleaching. This of course depends on the pulping process which is being used – the basic processes are groundwood sulphite and sulfate (kraft), but with modifications having distinctive names and commercial applications. Pulp and paper mills are considered to contribute 50 percent of all the waste dumped into Canadian waters.

Informed consent or informed rejection of pesticides

The situation at present is that people living near forest spraying sites are sometimes “informed” about the pesticide spraying, but even when they object, have no right of refusal. This is an undemocratic situation. Forest spraying is a massive and increasing problem in Nova Scotia. An alternate proposal, informed consent or informed rejection of pesticide use, was introduced by environmentalists in Nova Scotia in 1986, and deserves the support of the medical community. It is a policy easily recognizable to physicians.

The proposal is that people directly affected by the use of pesticides have the right to:

- a. Receive critical as well as promotional information;
- b. Receive information about alternatives to pesticide use; and
- c. Have the right to give informed consent or informed rejection to any spraying program which has the potential to impinge upon the immediate environment where people reside. This is a policy which should govern forestry, agriculture, roadside, power line and railway spraying and urban spraying situations. What this would mean for forest spraying, for example, is that rural residents who live, say, within one kilometer of forest areas targeted for spraying, must be informed at least 30 days in advance. Then such residents would give their individual written informed consent or informed rejection to such forest spraying. This then is binding upon the forest industry and the government. Although this is not the final answer, it would be a big step forward.

Access to critical information

Given that pesticides are in use at present, access to critical information is a major problem. There is a lot of information available, but it is essentially generated by the chemical companies who are manufacturing and selling the pesticides. The regulatory agencies and the pulp and paper companies advertise a toll-free number for information on pesticides, but this number is that of Agriculture Canada. This federal agency registers pesticides for use in Canada and promotes their use in agriculture. It is not uncommon for the manufacturer of a forestry pesticide, e.g. Monsanto, who makes the herbicide Vision (active ingredient glyphosate), to have their representatives intervene in the pesticide debate. They do this by writing “admonishing” letters to the activists and even appearing, side by side with the provincial department of environment, at community meetings held to discuss a pulp company’s spraying program.

Physicians could play a role in researching pesticides and making this information available to the public. Specifically, user-friendly critical information is needed for all pesticides in use in Nova Scotia on:

- a. **The active ingredient.** Normally, information about the active ingredient of a pesticide makes up whatever information is available. The manufacturer is the source for most of this information but information about the safety, testing, etc., is not released. Those seeking this kind of important health-related data are usually told it cannot be disclosed, in order to protect the manufacturer's patent rights.
- b. **The inert ingredients.** These can be fillers of a harmless nature, or enhance the toxicity of the active ingredient, or be poisonous in their own right. The Journal of Pesticide Reform, the best source of critical information in North America, has presented a lot of materials on inerts in pesticides. (A 1986 publication by Jennifer Curtis, Pesticide Exposure and the Role of the Physician, from the organization which puts out the Journal, would be of interest.)
- c. **The contaminants** from the production process. Some will remember the Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis* variety *kurstaki*) forest-spraying program against the spruce budworm, temporarily grounded in 1987 for two weeks, after streptococcus bacteria contamination was discovered. In 1989, the contaminant 1,4-Dioxane was identified in the forestry herbicide Vision.
- d. **The metabolites** of the pesticide. One of the breakdown products of glyphosate is formaldehyde.
- e. How the particular pesticide **interacts** with other chemicals and pesticides already present in the environment. What we do know is that the breast milk from American women has already been shown to be "contaminated with more than 100 industrial chemicals, including pesticides."

Pesticides are part of the "legal" ongoing toxic contamination of the Earth. All pesticides are poisonous to some degree. Contrary to what the pesticide users and their government regulatory accomplices say, we can do without them. We have to. We have to extend our personal sense of identify to include the well-being of the Earth. Physicians in Nova Scotia need to step forward on this environmental issue.

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