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The pesticide report that nobody read

Posted: June 16, 2008, 7:20 PM by NP Editor

[Terence Corcoran](#), [Junk Science](#), [Health Canada](#), [pesticides](#)

No major media picked up the story, even though it demolished every health and environmental claim devised by scaremongers

By Terence Corcoran

Welcome to the 10th Annual FP Comment Junk Science Week event, which begins today with a somewhat tedious and dry look at a classic, the pesticide scare. For more than a decade, the likes of Greenpeace, the Ontario College of Family Physicians, *The Globe and Mail* and scores of activists and city politicians have waged a relentless campaign against pesticide use.

It's easy to generate a junk science scare. You make stuff up, exaggerate the risks, politicize the subject and spin it into a corporate and ideological battle. And, above all, you ignore the facts. Which is what happened last month when Health Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency (PMRA) [released](#) its final reassessment of the leading pesticide, 2,4-D, and found the chemical to be safe when used properly.

No major media — not one — picked up the story, even though it systematically demolished every health and environmental claim the scaremongers had dumped onto a gullible community of journalists. Almost two weeks later, the *Ottawa Citizen's* Dan Gardner wrote a column on how the media missed the story. Still no reaction.

The limited fallout from Mr. Gardner's report is instructive. A Global News reporter picked it up and raised the Health Canada report with officials in Toronto. Health Canada's conclusions were dismissed by a city council member, and the views of an activist with the Toronto Environmental Alliance were repeated: "Many studies have linked 2,4-D to some serious health concerns such as cancer, reproductive developments in our children ... and even birth defects."

So much for Health Canada's work: One of the most comprehensive scientific reviews in Canadian history, carried out exclusively by Health Canada scientists and reviewed by independent government and university researchers trashed in 30 seconds by an activist repeating claims rejected by the review. All that work and the last media report ends with repetition of the junk science Health Canada had spent millions disproving.

The Global report was then followed by an op-ed in the *Citizen* by Neil Arya, of the Ontario College of Family Physicians, one of the leading proponents of the pesticide scare. Responding to Mr. Gardner, Dr. Arya trotted out the same old arguments his group has been using for years. He began with the usual catch-all scaremonger cop-out, accusing Health Canada of saying that a hazardous substance was safe. "Science cannot say 2,4-D, or any other toxic chemical designed to kill a biological organism, is safe."

Health Canada actually said 2,4-D was safe when used as directed — a logical statement that accompanies most human activity. We don't drive cars off cliffs because it's not safe. Any automobile is not safe when driven unsafely. Dr. Arya is playing with the reader's mind and warping Health Canada's thorough review of the issue.

Another favourite of junk science activists is the corporate smear. Official science is "industry" science, and therefore not to be trusted. Dr. Arya does that twice. He said Health Canada decisions are "predicated on industry-supplied, highly controlled" studies. Not true, but he went on to say the media should not be "unduly influenced by the corporate agenda."

Health Canada actually addresses directly the myths of the corporate science issue. First it notes that it evaluates the science as science, not on the basis of who supplied it. Second, it adds that industry-supplied science can often be superior, if only because industry studies are often accompanied by full "raw data," something that doesn't always come with other published studies.

It's easy to lay the charges and mount a campaign, to convey fear and uncertainty, compared with the dry business of actually conducting a science review. The excerpts from the Health Canada 2,4-D review elsewhere on this page are no fun. It's easy to scare people with the fact that 2,4-D is a chemical descendant of Agent Orange, but not all that interesting to learn that Agent Orange is actually a different chemical. It's easy to mention Sweden and Denmark, countries that have banned 2,4-D, but tedious to read of the reality behind the ban and the fact that Europe as a whole and other jurisdictions continue to approve its use.

The anti-pesticide activists (whatever their motivation) also have an easy fall-back to the incontrovertible fact that there is no scientific certainty,

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and to argue that, as a result, we should invoke the precautionary principle. Our Junk Science Week reports will include a critical look at the precautionary principle.

The activists, however, have an even more treacherous science concept up their sleeves. When Ontario's Environment Minister, John Gerretsen, was asked last week about Health Canada's finding on the safety of 2,4-D, he raised another issue. Health Canada, he said, was looking at pesticides on a "product-by-product" basis. That's not good enough. Instead, Ontario wants Ottawa to conduct research into the "cumulative effects" of many chemicals. One chemical may be safe, but so what? What about the combined impact of all chemicals in the environment.

It's a growing activist theme — the chemical soup concept — that looms as the next big science scare. Even if one chemical is safe, it could be a risk when combined with others. The prospects for expanding popular concerns and regulatory paralysis are limitless.

Financial Post

Terence Corcoran is editor of the Financial Post.

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9 Comments

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by ZeeBC

Jun 17 2008

1:06 AM

Now I'm wondering if there has been a study on mixing coffee, bacon, orange juice, fruitloops, the morning after pill, vegemite and a twinkie in one's gut every day?

by Don_88

Jun 17 2008

5:53 AM

Terrance:

Thanks for this great piece. I took the liberty of sending it to our city's council members but like most lemming-like creatures, thinking as individuals is too onerous and believing the truth - well that is beyond their ability.

by Talulah

Jun 17 2008

7:43 AM

Thanks Terence, for bringing this to the forefront. 2,4-D is an herbicide that has been in use for over sixty years. Most of us, in North America, have probably been exposed to it daily in some form or another, since we were knee high to a grasshopper, as grain crop growers, to control weed growth, primarily use it. That includes your toast, your cereal, your sandwich at lunch, your dinner roll, and cake for dessert. Oh, and it probably was there in the "grain fed" part of your steak.

I am sure we could link deaths to it. We can link death to almost anything these days.

We have not, however, banned cigarette or alcohol production and use, coffee drinking, fast food, or as Terence stated, car driving.

Imagine the impact on grain prices if weeds were left to run a muck in North America's breadbasket. Take it to an international level and hunger becomes a worldwide issue. Somehow, "Save the weeds! Starve the people!" just does not make sense. Perhaps Dr. Arya should go hug a tree, it's less likely to kill us all off.

by JFJ

Jun 17 2008

9:30 AM

The same types effected a virtual world wide ban on the use of DDT in the last century. As a result, malaria is back as a cause of death of millions in Africa. It is clear that the agenda of eco-activists doesn't include the protection of lives of the most vulnerable.

by KellyFranklin

Jun 17 2008
4:01 PM

I was sprayed with 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T while living in CFB Galetown from 1958 until 1964. Some people call that the recipe for Agent Orange.

Our government just sent me a form offering me a \$20,000 ex gratia payment due to this exposure. This was after having kept it a state secret for 50 years, a fact that condemned thousands.

There is now a class action in the works seeking billions of dollars for the largest intentional mass poisoning of a country's citizens in history.

You will note that I am not arguing about the toxicity of the chemicals in question and have mentioned money twice. I could easily describe all the resulting death and disease, but I'm limiting this comment to something Mr. Corcoran understands.

Kelly Porter Franklin

Nanaimo, BC

by dbgnvan
Jun 17 2008
9:00 PM

I found this to be an informative article. I wonder how many folks ignoring this piece of research, would have been urging the gov't to NOT ignore the research done on Vancouver's safe injection site. Oh, I won't mention what the ban on pesticide spraying did to the forests of BC. That's another inconvenient truth that nobody seems to want to bring. I'm pro environment and I'm pro science. A science approach isn't perfect in the short term, but it will always be more accurate in the longer term.

by The Red
Jun 19 2008
5:48 PM

So what are the effects of 2-4,D if not "used properly"?

I agree that, for example, 2-4,D applied under professional supervision on farmed oysters for human consumption is an acceptable risk.

But applied by non-professionals for cosmetic purposes such as vanity items like Victorian lawns? So we can irrigate these 19th century-style lawns with \$0.00/litre municipal water?

With all due respect, I do not believe that Terry has explored all aspects of this common property problem.

by guillermo69
Jun 19 2008
6:49 PM

A powerful article.

Will the activists now lay off?

In your dreams. They will simply change tact, as Terrance

has alluded to.

Sad..sad indeed.

by Alex Thompson
Jun 23 2008
5:13 PM

As a professional in the pesticide industry, I laugh at the 2,4-D/Agent Orange hype created by the likes of David Suzuki. Yes, 2,4-D was a component of Agent Orange, though because of its association with the banned 2,4,5-T, it has come by a somewhat bad reputation. 2,4,5-T manufacturing processes released poisonous 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin (TCDD) as a by-product, which contaminated the herbicide. The ill effects of Agent Orange had nothing to do

with 2,4-D, which has been the most widely used herbicide on the planet for the past 62 years.

To 'The Red' Re: effects of 2,4-D.

You completely missed the point in the article concerning Dr. Arya's straw-man argument that 'an acceptable risk is unacceptable'. 2,4-D has a lethal dosage to humans, as do bananas, peanut butter, gatorade, water, and thousands of other products people consume on a daily basis.

Due to the nature of my work, I am exposed to more pesticide residue in a week than any homeowner would come in contact with in their lifetime, and I have been in this business for years. To suggest ANY immediate acute toxic effects, save for the rare allergic reaction, during or after its application is completely ludicrous. Allergic reaction you say? That is a risk! Unacceptable! Yet how many people suffering from asthma and hay fever have trouble breathing and break out in hives due to pollen from noxious weeds?

People who take pride in the appearance of their properties should have access to the means to make it as beautiful and 'Victorian' as they want. What right does the government have in regulating what you can and cannot put on your lawn? If you have kids, go ask them if they'd rather play soccer on a grass field or one that is full of thistles and plantain that has caused most of the topsoil to erode away, leaving a concrete-like playing surface. Let us also not forget that a grass lawn produces 80% more oxygen than one that has 50% weeds.

Truth be told, people's lawns will eventually be completely wiped out by chinch bugs, sod webworms and/or white grubs and since no amount of beet juice extract or any other 'organic' product will combat these infestations, people are going to realize they now have to spend thousands of dollars to have their lawn seeded or sodded. Same thing goes for flower gardens and young trees. And who's ultimately responsible? Mr. Dalton McGUILTY.

Ask yourself, are we really doing humanity a favour?