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## Dioxins slip through system

25 Jul, 2013 04:00 AM  
MATTHEW CAWOOD



**CropLife Australia's Matthew Cossey said there needs to be a national suite of "control of use" laws to protect farm workers.**

A BRUTAL exposure of chemical regulation flaws by ABC's *Four Corners* program earlier this week has prompted calls for a review of the system.

*Four Corners* highlighted a terrible past toll from the use of herbicides containing dioxins, and revealed that despite being on global chemical blacklist, the compounds are still sneaking through in formulations currently being used in Australia.

CropLife Australia's Matthew Cossey, treading carefully between CropLife's agricultural chemical and biotechnology corporate membership and the apparent regulatory flaws exposed by the ABC report, said there needs to be a national suite of "control of use" laws to protect farm workers.

Mr Cossey also cited a lack of resources for the Ag Quality Assurance scheme, which is empowered to test chemical products for dangerous contaminants.

"The whole of industry, government and the regulator need to recommit to ensuring the quality of all agricultural chemical products and their safe and responsible use."

For cancer researcher Lin Fritschi, *Four Corners* highlighted the flaws in a regulatory system that is "Byzantine" in its complexity.

Professor Fritschi, a cancer epidemiologist with the Western Australian Institute for Medical Research, has a long history of investigation into links between occupation and cancer.

Prof. Fritschi said there are some red flags around chemical use.

"There is increasing evidence that some leukemias and lymphomas are linked to particular types of chemicals. Our problem is that we don't have the evidence.

"It's not there is no association, but the numbers are low, and our exposure assessments are not very good.

"There might not be enough evidence to say something causes cancer, but overall there is enough evidence to say that

this is not a good product to be drinking."

The evidence base is stronger for links between certain pesticides and neurological, reproductive and skin problems, but drawing direct links between product and effect remain problematic.

She believes the spaghetti diagram that is now the chemical review and approval process needs to be greatly simplified, and that the AVPMA needs to be much more proactive in how it handles the approval process.

The *Four Corners* team built a harrowing narrative going back to the 1970s, highlighting the devastation wreaked on a Kimberley spray gang that used 2,4,5-T and 2,4-D. "They slept in it, worked in it, for 10 days at a time," one man said.

Most of the gang have since died of diseases the program identified with dioxins, an acutely toxic group of compounds present in 2,4,5-T and in some formulations of 2,4-D.

The son of one sprayer, Nigel Sinclair, who played in his father's contaminated clothing as a child, was filmed in the last stages of the cancer Leiomyosarcoma.

*Four Corners* also profiled the health collapse among a group of government sprayers in Gippsland, Victoria, and an apparent attempt to cover up a batch of dioxin-contaminated drums.

The World Health Organisation credits dioxins with the ability to "cause reproductive and developmental problems, damage the immune system, interfere with hormones and also cause cancer".

Chemicals using 2,4,5-T were banned in Australia in the 1990s because of their high dioxin levels, but 2,4-D remains on the market on the assumption that dioxin levels in the formula are either low or negligible.

But when in 2009, researchers at the National Research Centre for Environmental Toxicology tested pesticide formulations to prove that they contained no dioxins, they were startled to find the reverse true.

"(Dioxin levels) were, for some of the pesticides, similar to what was known for 2,4,5-T, which was banned in the 80s, 90s," the Centre's Associate Professor Caroline Gaus told the ABC.

The analysis was expanded to include 2,4-D. One batch of the herbicide contained moderate levels of dioxin.

The Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) repeated the tests, and confirmed that some chemicals contained dioxins.

When *Four Corners* did its own sampling of 2,4-D formulations, it found dioxin levels seven times higher than the Queensland tests in a batch of Amino 625, imported by Sanonda.

The issue, the program implied, is the source of the chemical. Formulations sourced from China or India may be more likely to have been processed in a way that generates dioxins.

In a letter, Melbourne-based Sanonda told *Four Corners*, "As we understand the APVMA does not have any guidelines at present for 2,4-D dioxin".

"From our review of the report you sent, the result shows Amino 625 in good light according to the EU guidelines."

Mr Cossey, who represents the bigger end of the ag pharmaceutical spectrum, suggested that the regulator "be sufficiently resourced to enable pursuit of pesticide manufacturers and importers who do not comply with the law".

"A regulator that only regulates the legitimate industry is not an effective allocation of resources."

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## READER COMMENTS

Bloody amazing! If one of our football heros has so much as a thought bubble about drugs, the drug testers will be hammering on his door at 6AM the next day. Yet in 2009, researchers at the National Research Centre for Environmental Toxicology tested pesticide formulations in 24D and found dioxins of a concerning magnitude and nothing is done to clean up the industry or even make AVPMA do the job it is supposed to, that is, ensure the proper safety and regulation of our ag chemicals. Isn't there anyone at the helm?

Posted by **Trugger**, 25/07/2013 6:48:59 AM

Need to keep it in perspective. Typical of their reporting, most of 4Corners was focused on the dramatic side of reckless practices carried out 40 years ago. Anyone handling pesticides now should be wearing PPE & be aware of the risk of exposure to any chemical no matter how safe it may be reported to be. That doesn't detract from the slackness of the APVMA & the importing chemical companies. The APVMA spokes person was obviously dodging around. Most farmers use equipment & practises to minimise off target drift but like most things there will always be the gun-ho cowboys who don't care.

Posted by **Fred**, 25/07/2013 10:26:14 AM

I recall back in the 90's testing of 2,3,7,8-TCDD and other dioxins was required to register new sources of 2,4-D active in Australia. Due to the background level of dioxins in the environment and levels (ppb) in samples it was a very difficult analysis and only 1 or 2 Labs could such work accurately.

The testing requirement appears to have been dropped by the APVMA based on risk assessments. Pesticides are an obvious source of dioxins in the environment but there are many other natural sources and synthetic sources from many industries.

Posted by **Common sense Lindfield**, 25/07/2013 11:05:16 AM

Unlike the situation with 2,4,5T, I did not think that dioxin contamination was a problem with 2,4,D. Apparently depending on the care with the syntesis of 2,4, D, dioxin may be a contaminant. Since this appears to be the case with some imported batches of 2.4,D it adds concern to the risk of such contamination of imported foods.

As to the Four Corners program what concerned me most was the vague understanding the APVMA had of the situation.

Posted by **BillWa**, 25/07/2013 1:45:44 PM

What is most concerning, especially if the doubt lies predominately with 2,4-D from overseas batches, is the new wave of GM crops that have been engineered to be sprayed with 2,4-D ( now that weeds are resistant to Roundup). These are already gaining approval as safe from our regulatory bodies such as FSANZ , but I wonder if the residue levels will be regularly tested for dioxins?

Posted by **Hebe**, 25/07/2013 2:19:04 PM

I agree that some of the ABC Four Corners programme was old footage and there is no excuse for not using the PPE when handling Pesticides. But I'm more concerned with the regulator the APVMA in Canberra, are they doing their job in regards to standards?. I think not.

Posted by **angasb**, 25/07/2013 4:50:28 PM

Clean and green was only ever our reputation. It was never our assurance. We are now being asked to prove it. We are about to get busted.

Posted by **Bosco**, 25/07/2013 5:29:47 PM

See APVMA's FAQ defence 22/7/13. The government doesn't give them enough resources to police properly, so they sit passively waiting for your complaints. If you know of "red flags" then raise them as "Adverse Experience Reports" otherwise there's no trigger for the APVMA to act:

[http://www.apvma.gov.au/use\\_safely/adverse/index.php](http://www.apvma.gov.au/use_safely/adverse/index.php)

Posted by **Alice**, 25/07/2013 6:28:50 PM

This story gives us one more reason to buy Australian because the locally made 2,4-D is stringently quality controlled.

Posted by **gary from gawler**, 25/07/2013 6:42:23 PM

It also means that if imported chemicals contain these impurities, then imported foods must also contain these unsafe chemicals.

All imported foods should be tested more stringently than they are.

Posted by **R**, 25/07/2013 7:54:20 PM

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