



## **Feds Fumble Pesticide Progress**

**The federal government's ability to regulate and monitor pesticides is outdated and ineffective. The federal Pest Management Review Agency, Ottawa's monitoring body, refuses to tell other departments what chemicals are in the pesticides it approves. Although Ottawa spends more than \$100 million per year to assess toxic substances, it has reached firm conclusions on only 31 of 23,000 chemicals in use. Of 22 industrialized countries surveyed, only Canada and the Slovak republic don't collect data on pesticide sales.**

**Damning facts? They come straight from the May 1999 report of Brian Emmett, Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development. Within weeks of Emmett's report, Parliament set up the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Environment and Sustainable Development and gave them the responsibility to fully look into the pesticide issue and come up with recommendations. The committee met and heard witnesses for a year. In June they released their report, "Pesticides: Making the Right Choice for the Protection of Health and the Environment".**

**The report reflected a grim reality. Canada's Pesticide Control Products Act has not been changed for 31 years, despite leaps in scientific knowledge and understanding about the impact of pesticides on human health and the environment. "More than 7000 pesticides are registered for use in Canada, many of which contain active ingredients that have not been reviewed for years. Of 500 active ingredients contained in registered products, over 300 were approved before 1981 and 150 before 1960," the committee reports. Further, they point out, most of these chemicals were assessed under an "adult male" standard. But beyond reviewing the flaws in the present situation, the Committee's report recommends that the government make major adjustments in the way Canada deals with pesticides. They recommend decisive action based on strong principles.**

**The first principle they propose is to "make the protection of human health and the environment the absolute priority in pest management decisions, especially the protection of children and other vulnerable populations." This principle might seem non-controversial. But there is much manoeuvring at the federal level over whether health and environmental interests or industry and trade interests should be in the driver's seat when looking at pesticides. It was only a few years ago that responsibility for pesticide regulation was moved to the Health Canada from Agriculture Canada.**

The second principle is even more of a departure from present practices. The committee wants the government "to ensure that a precautionary approach is taken." They recommend that "appropriate preventive measures are to be taken where there is reason to believe that a pesticide is likely to cause harm, even when there is no conclusive evidence to prove a causal relation between the pesticide and its effects." For example, the committee recommends that a new act should prescribe a minimum additional safety factor of 10 in assessing risk for children and other vulnerable populations. "What constitutes an acceptable risk should be based on child health criteria" the report states.

The committee recommends new research and new standards for testing. They also recommend that the federal government phase out the use of cosmetic lawn chemicals over a five year period.

All parties represented on the committee supported the report, with the exception of the Canadian Alliance. The Alliance MP submitted a minority report saying the majority report "lacked balance" and that it "fails to recognize tremendous efforts and successes achieved by manufacturers and users of pest control products to make those products as safe to human health and the environment as they are effective in controlling pests and protecting crops."

What has been the federal government's response to the committee report? As far as the principles of putting health concerns first and adopting the precautionary principle, the government claims that its present practice of "acceptable risk" on the basis of proven data means the same thing. They have introduced no amendments to the Pest Products Control Act, although even their own Pest Management Review Agency advised this in July 1999. They have done nothing to live up to the commitment Canada made at the G-8 Summit in Denver to put children's health first when enacting legislation. Instead of making a commitment to phase out lawn chemicals, they pledge that lawn chemicals will be re-evaluated within the next two years. No changes in the evaluation process or standards have been announced.

"I can see no indication, in Minister Rock's press release and the related documents, of any serious intent to limit pesticide use and protect the health of Canadian children," said Dr. Warren Bell, Executive Director of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment. "I can only assume that pressures from the corporate sector have once more carried the day, and business interests have won out over health and environmental concerns."

The government also sidestepped another opportunity to take decisive action on the pesticide issue. Liberal MP Marlene Jennings introduced a private members bill, C-388, in the House of Commons on December 1, 1999 titled "An Act to Prohibit the Use of Chemical Pesticides for Non-essential Purposes." It calls for "a moratorium on cosmetic use of chemical pesticides in the home and garden and on recreational facilities such as parks and golf courses until scientific evidence that shows such use is safe has been presented to Parliament and concurred in by a parliamentary committee." Jennings' bill is an attempt to put the precautionary principle into immediate action in the case of cosmetic, non-essential pesticide use.

**The Liberals could already have made this a government bill and passed it, taking one large, concrete step to limit the impact of pesticides on health and the environment. If they had, they would have been acting consistently with the will of party members. In March 2000, Liberals from across the country convened to establish party policy. Their priority on the environment was a resolution calling for a moratorium on cosmetic pesticide use (very similar in intent to C-388) which passed overwhelmingly.**

**It's not just Liberals who want to see Parliament take pesticide dangers seriously. A poll conducted by the World Wildlife Fund in March 2000 found that 90% of Canadians say they want reform of Canada's outdated pesticide legislation to be a priority for Parliament. The poll referred to all pesticides, both cosmetic and agricultural. It also found that 80% of Canadians believe the federal government should offer financial incentives to farmers specifically for the purpose of reducing their reliance on pesticides.**

**Will the Jennings bill be reintroduced when Parliament resumes? Will the real principles recommended by the standing committee be adopted and turned into legislation? The political will for change is strong among Canadians, but so far there is little indication that it will turn into government action.**