

## DDT: An Issue of Property Rights

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Over the years, DDT(1) has acquired an almost Satanic image. Yet the overuse of DDT, rather than the product itself, was what caused significant environmental harm. Rather than condemning the product-which remains critical to the elimination of malaria and so to human welfare-we should understand its history, and in particular, the U.S. government's policy of promoting and subsidizing the use of DDT.

When DDT was released for civilian use after World War II, it was recognized as effective and generally benign to humans. It was so popular it was even thrown instead of rice at some weddings (Whorton 1974, 248). Production soared.

Producers of DDT and other new pesticides had the best of all possible worlds. Regulation was limited to concerns about efficacy, not safety. The Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act, enacted in 1947, gave the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) weak powers to require proof that a pesticide was effective and required manufacturers to register their products. However, it denied the department the ability to refuse to register a product (Morriss 1997, 139). Thus, producers had no significant limitation on their ability to manufacture and sell effective pesticides. State regulation was preempted in many areas, and the federal regulatory agency was sympathetic.

The USDA began to promote widespread spraying with DDT and other pesticides (see Bosso 1987, 81Ð106). USDA conducted research and promotion of pesticides through its extension service and experiment stations. Members of Congress were happy to spend taxpayers' money to subsidize agricultural production through spraying, especially because it won the favor of chemical producers, too. A genuine sense of mission bolstered the powerful special interests at work- pesticides would boost food production, helping to end hunger.

