

People's Pesticide Exposure – report on By-stander exposure by the UK Royal Commission on Environment

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Pesticide Action Network UK warmly welcomes an important new report by the UK Royal Commission on Environmental Report 'Crop spraying and the health of residents and bystanders' (available online at www.rcep.org.uk/cropspraying.htm).

The Royal Commission's key finding is that, 'Based on the conclusions from our visits and our understanding of the biological mechanisms with which pesticides interact, it is plausible that there could be a link between residents and bystander pesticide exposure and chronic ill health. We find that we are not able to rule out this possibility. We recommend that a more precautionary approach is taken with passive exposure to pesticides.'

We believe it will prove influential. We welcome the endorsement, in this report, of our longstanding recommendation that the surveillance of ill-health effects from pesticides should pass from the UK Health & Safety Executive to the new Health Protection Agency. We will be campaigning hard to ensure that the costs to human health of pesticides fall on the agrochemical industry, on the 'polluter pays' principle.

The Royal Commission is recommending that we should have the right to know which pesticides we are being exposed to: neighbours and residents should be given prior notification of which pesticides they are to be used, and signs should be placed on site at potential access points. Walkers and everyone who uses the countryside, and health researchers, should be able to find out which toxins have been applied to the land and are contaminating our bodies. PAN UK anticipates that this new access to knowledge will be fiercely resisted by all those who have an interest in keeping it secret.

The role of government scientists in defending poor science has been exposed. Of the UK government's Pesticides Safety Directorate's risk assessment for bystander exposure, they say 'We have .. been disappointed to find that the current approach has not been rigorously evaluated under field conditions and has largely been assessed in relation to experiments done on a limited scale over twenty years ago and reassessed on the basis of other data often collected for different purposes in Germany and the US.' It is scandalous that the ACP defended bad science and dismissed campaigners' perceptions.

PAN UK urges the government to act on the Royal Commission's recommendations and to:

- introduce a new surveillance scheme for pesticide-related disease, to be run by the Health Protection Agency, the cost of which (estimated at £5-10 million per year) should be covered by a levy on pesticides sales; the HPA and related organisations in the devolved administrations should collect population data on pesticides and other chemicals suspected to cause chronic disease, and a long-overdue national database for biomonitoring should be introduced;
- give residents, walkers, and everyone who lives in or visits the countryside the right to know what pesticides they are being exposed to by introducing mandatory notification both in advance and with signs on site;

- Public health must be prioritised above pest control, and the Department of Health should be given a more powerful remit in relation to pesticide-related disease.