Australia: Health in Tasmania gravely affected by pesticide use in tree monocultures

Between 1994 and 2004 the land converted from native forests and farms to monoculture tree plantations in Tasmania has increased almost fourfold – to 207,000 hectares.

Most farms replaced were organic or used relatively few chemicals as compared to the highly chemically-dependent monoculture tree coupes that replaced them.

Pesticides are now used on an extraordinary scale. Taking full advantage of the exemptions to planning and environmental legislation and the general regulatory failure at all levels of Government to control pesticide use, the industry disperses toxic chemicals in cowboy fashion over thousands of hectares above tree canopies, at high altitude and over very large and broad areas of land. The toxic drift then further scatters over household rooves that collect rainwater for families, into until recently pristine creeks and rivers, over and in town water catchments and temperate rainforest alike. Not one patch of Tasmania is likely to be protected from a poisonous mist and runoff that must surely play a large part in the alarming climb in overall cancer rates and other inexplicable disease epidemics here.

Countless complaints about drinking water contamination and likely impacts on adjacent food farming went almost entirely unheeded. Preventative actions, whether adequate or not, were only implemented when community action was particularly vocal or public. When Derby, Lorinna and West Calder drinking water became contaminated with the toxic triazines residents took action by establishing the Tasmanian Clean Water Network. Its purpose was to campaign for change in chemical use by way of warning the public about the breakdown of chemical regulation in Tasmania in particular.

In early 2004 a major oyster kill hit the aquaculture industry in North East Tasmania. The oyster growers lost $1.5 million dollars worth of stock overnight. Dr Marcus Scammell, a marine biologist, published a report that with the help of unprecedented media attention rang alarm bells across the State. His writing aptly and further emphasised the vulnerability of people, industry and ecosystems from the effects of the uncontrolled use of pesticides in Tasmania. Subsequent testing of surface waters in the George River showed sections of the river were toxic to living organisms.

A local doctor in the area, Dr Alison Bleaney, supported calls by Dr Scammell for the implementation of the precautionary principle. She further highlighted the chemical dangers by bringing to public attention a surge in cancer and neurological cases in north-eastern Tasmania since 2002 which she believed was consistent with chronic low-level chemical exposure. However, no epidemiological studies have ensued to investigate possible cancer and other disease clusters that could correlate with pesticides.

State-wide changes in cancer incidence are raising deep concerns. Between 1980 and 1999 for instance there was:

- A 67% increase in the incident rate for non-Hodgkins lymphoma;

- An 86.4% increase in the incident rate for prostrate cancer;
- A 273.4% increase in the incident rate for thyroid cancer;
- Since 1980 the incidence rates for all cancers combined has almost doubled in Tasmania.

The state also has the highest percentage of people suffering diabetes in Australia. with more than 5000 new cases having been recorded here in the last three years. That represents an “epidemic that has the potential to cripple the health system according to Christopher Stopp, Tasmanian chief executive of Diabetes Australia”

Multiple Sclerosis is 7 times more common in Tasmania than in Northern Queensland. And “Tasmania has much higher rates of coronary heart disease, obesity, hypertension and high blood cholesterol than other Australian States.”

Industry practice hides behind the limited science of toxicology to justify dangerous practices. Citizens have no defence when the onus of proof of harm is placed on the unresourced families and children who suffer the pesticides not only in their food and water but also in their bodies.

The 2003 Total Diet Survey carried out by Foods Standards Australia New Zealand found residues of 36 different types of pesticides in a range of commonly eaten foods in Australia. But this was only a limited testing regime. Tasmanian and Victorian residents have raised concerns about pesticide take up by grazing animals including dairy cattle but media and Government action in this dilemma has been almost completely ineffective in terms of protecting people and the environment.

Ironically there are no long-term economic justifications for large scale and intensive use of pesticides. Such practices merely herald in the consequences of corporate absentee land ownership and the drive for such 'enterprises' to reduce the cost of labour and maximise profits in the short term. It’s clear, from the large body of evidence already available worldwide, that we are now experiencing the effects of long-term exposure. This is likely to extend to future generations even in the unlikely event that pesticide use were to stop today.

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