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## **Pesticides - banning the silent killer**

by Hiltrud Breyer MEP

When it comes to pesticides, the idea of killing two birds with one stone literally holds true. Not only do pesticides kill unwanted organisms such as pests and weeds, they also cause massive problems for the environment and human health, for example contamination of ground water and the loss of biodiversity. They accumulate in the human body with serious damaging consequences, many of which we only begin to understand. Despite increased environmental awareness and the development of substances active at lower dosage, the amount of pesticides used in Europe is growing.

Under the Sixth Environment Action Programme the European Commission presented a "pesticide package". Their long overdue proposal consists of a thematic strategy on the sustainable use of pesticides, a directive which covers questions of the sustainable use including a ban on aerial spraying, as well as a regulation for the placing on the market of the pesticides active substances and products, for which I am the rapporteur for the EP's Environment Committee.

This is why I was very pleased to recently host a seminar by the Pesticides Action Network Europe and Health and Environment Alliance HEAL on pesticide use reduction, together with my colleagues Erna Hennicot-Schoepges, Dorette Corbey and Roberto Mussacchio. The current proposal for the regulation by the Commission does not address the special sensitivity of children to pesticides, despite wide consensus in the scientific community that children and foetuses are indeed more sensible to chemicals.

In the regulation, we need to take clearly into account vulnerable groups and to make their protection as strong as possible. One consequence of this is to ban harmful pesticides, and the debates in the seminar strongly underlined the need for a hazard-based approach.

Dr. Roberto Bertollini, Director of the World Health Organization's Special Programme on Health and Environment argued for a precautionary approach on pesticides, meaning risk assessment based on children's sensitivity, the elimination of the most dangerous pesticides, the management of obsolete stocks and the inclusion of risk reduction in Research and Development and new pesticides.

His arguments were underlined by the work presented by Professor Philippe Grandjean, Adjunct Professor of Environmental Health at the Harvard School of Public Health. He strongly advocates for preventive action to protect the human brain. Professor Grandjean is the author of a new study on the dangerous and irreversible effects toxic chemicals and pesticides have on children's brains, a clear wake-up call to all of us. The study lists over 200 substances which are neurotoxic for development, 91 of which are pesticides. A brain is unique and cannot be replaced - the fetal brain is more vulnerable to mercury than an adult's and exposure is reducing children's I.Q. Pesticides are part of this silent epidemic.

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The participants also heard of the experience of Georgina Downs, from the UK Pesticides Campaign, who lives surrounded by fields in West Sussex on how to best protect residents and bystanders from dangerous pesticides. Her recommendation is that protection of public health should be the number one priority of pesticide policy.

The seminar was concluded with remarks by Genon Jensen, Executive Director of the Health and Environment Alliance, and Sofia Parente from the Pesticide Action Network Europe. Genon Jensen urged participants to cut back on pesticides for healthier lives. HEAL is concerned that cases of behavioural and mental disorders and cancer in European children are increasing. Both she and Sofia Parente stressed the need for a regulation that protects the vulnerability of children, with an increase in the safety level by a factor of 10. Certain substances should simply not be approved for use. These included those listed as priority concerns by international treaties, such as those listed in the annex to the Water Framework Directive 2000/60/EEC.

In my opinion, this exchange of views confirmed that it is high noon for greater awareness and action for the protection of vulnerable groups. It became clear during the session that we urgently need to take into account the dangers of toxic pesticide cocktails we consume and the combination effects pesticides can have. Way too many times, pesticide residues in much higher concentrations than allowed are found in fruits and vegetables. It is high time that we review the authorization for those pesticides which are over the EU minimum residue levels times and again. There is obviously a failure in the proper use of these pesticides.

It must be possible for us as consumers to make informed choices to buy safe fruits and vegetables. Transparency in the chain from authorization of pesticides, documentation of proper use right down to the consumers is crucial, with as much information on the internet as possible. I also strongly advocate for a pesticide passport for retailers and wholesalers. It cannot be right that pesticides are the only travellers which can go anywhere without a passport.

For too long, the environment and human beings have had to suffer from the dangerous effects of pesticides. In the next months, all three parts of the pesticide package will go through the EP Environment Committee and plenary. I count on the support of the European Parliament to ensure the best possible protection of human health and the environment from dangerous pesticides.

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All presentations of the workshop can be downloaded from the website of the Health & Environment Alliance at: <http://www.env-health.org/a/2468>