

# Sydney migrant farmers exposed to chemical risks

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For over 14 years, government authorities in the Australian state of New South Wales have allowed migrant market gardeners in the Sydney area to endanger their own health and potentially that of consumers through the unsafe use of agricultural chemicals.

Ninety percent of perishable fruit and vegetables sold in Sydney, worth \$150 million annually, are grown in the Sydney basin. An estimated 2,000 migrant farmers live an often precarious existence cultivating small plots of snow peas, snake beans, cherry tomatoes and other “boutique crops” in the city’s outer suburbs.

They include long-standing farmers from Italian, Maltese, Chinese and Greek backgrounds and more recently-arrived growers, many of whom have fled war and conflict in Indochina, Lebanon and Iraq. Often the farmers are poor and under severe pressure to produce crops as cheaply as possible. Most have problems reading and speaking English.

Concerns were first raised in 1987, when Italian market gardeners in the Hornsby area, north of Sydney, were found to be suffering high rates of respiratory illness due to chemical use. The Sydney Basin Pesticide Team, set up by NSW Agriculture in 1988, concluded that the growers simply did not understand that there were problems associated with exposure to pesticides. Migrant farmers were less likely, for example, to wear protective clothing when handling chemicals.

In 1989, NSW Agriculture began testing on a statewide basis, examining 30 types of fruit and vegetables for 25 pesticides, including organophosphates, organochlorines, pyrethoid, fungicides and heavy metals. Almost half the samples in its 1992-1995 survey contained residues of one fungicide and nearly 10 percent may have exceeded the maximum recommended levels.

In 1993, the National Registration Authority for Veterinary and Agricultural Chemicals (NRA) held a seminar on the subject of chemical labels, reflecting concerns that the farmers did not understand them. But this year, the NRA admitted that still no labels had been translated. In fact, Agriculture Minister Richard Amery dismissed the idea. “It would be very difficult to have a translation that would fit the target audience we are trying to reach,” he argued. Over the same period, the government reduced testing for chemical contamination of fruit and vegetables. Claiming that the tests were unreliable it has published no results since 1995. It recently closed its Sydney laboratory and reduced its statewide testing from 500 to 300 annual tests. Safety levels on many fruits and vegetables were revised upwards, cutting the rate of violations by two-thirds. And thanks to government inaction, growers are still using toxic pesticides without protective clothing or masks, spraying veterinary chemicals on crops, mixing chemicals with bare hands and smelling chemicals to identify them.

Dr Frances Parker and Karunasena Suriyabanadara from the University of Western Sydney, who have been researching the problems confronting the market gardeners for over 15 years, are highly critical of the government’s record. In a report published last year, they accused it of adopting “a market driven user-pays approach” and of favouring “top-end”—better off—growers.

Parker believes that it would be relatively easy and inexpensive to target the pesticides used by particular ethnic groups and to make translated information available at the point of sale.

After carefully winning the confidence of growers, she and Suriyabanadara concluded that: “The biggest problem was that no farmer believed that there was a

problem to be investigated.” Some thought chemicals were “medicine” for “sick” plants. Instead of pesticide dangers, growers wanted to discuss “survival issues” such as visits by the “tax man”, problems in leasing land, the cost of production, marketing, crop losses, access to technical information and its reliability and social security allowances.

Few of the Indochinese growers had previous experience in market gardening. Previous occupations included fisherman, soldier, teacher, ranger, rice farmer, sugarcane farmer, mechanic and restaurant worker.

Many were refugees whose lack of English condemned them to arduous factory jobs where they were exposed to racist abuse. Many had gone into farming “to be their own boss” and to avoid unemployment. Their ability to socialise and to learn English was hindered by the extremely long hours they worked. They rarely hired workers, relying instead on the labour of family members, children included.

In 1995, Parker sent a paper to the state Ethnic Affairs Commission, leading to the establishment of a government task force. It found that growers were unable to read the English-only labels and safety instructions on chemicals. It also discovered that more than half the growers from non-English speaking backgrounds reported feeling ill after using chemicals, yet only one-third had a blood test.

It is now three years since the task force concluded, but there is still no reliable data on the health status of the growers and no adverse incident reporting scheme. “It appears likely that acute poisonings possibly due to pesticide exposure are not recorded as such,” Parker and Suriyabanadara concluded last year.

The government has proposed a new regulation under the Pesticides Act requiring all farmers to keep chemical spray records for three years. Parker believes that without assistance the market gardeners will be unable to comply.

Mark Oakwood from the Total Environment Centre has condemned the government’s cuts to the testing program. “To assume that food in NSW is free of harmful pesticide residues based on only 300 samples is laughable,” he said in a recent media release. “To make the situation even worse, there are many loopholes that escape the feeble survey attempts of government. The big supermarket chains do their own

testing, but do not release the results, and small growers can sell their produce direct to local growers, without any testing whatsoever”.

Some of the pesticides are known to have serious health effects. Organophosphate compounds can undermine the proper functioning of the nervous system, causing dizziness and sometimes convulsions that may lead to death. Carbamate exposure can reduce fertility and hemoglobin levels. Phenoxy herbicides are believed to be responsible for delayed foetal development, mutations and cancer.

Since the media highlighted the plight of the market gardeners in April, the government has been at pains to assure consumers that remedial action will be taken. The NSW Environmental Trust has awarded Parker a \$250,000 grant to develop an integrated pest management strategy for farmers. An education and training program for growers is to be implemented over five years. Various working groups have been set up.

However, none of this will alleviate the financial pressures on growers. Moreover, the state government appears loathe to cut across the substantial profit interests of the companies involved. In 2000, the top seven corporations producing agricultural chemicals—Syngenta, Monsanto, Aventis, DuPont, Dow, Bayer and BASF—accounted for sales of \$US22.7 billion worldwide.



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