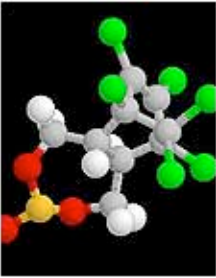


The Northern Advocate



The organic chlorine insecticide endosulfan. Picture/supplied

Spray sparks cancer concern

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by Andre Hueber

A pesticide linked to cancer and other health problems is still used on Whangarei sports fields despite being banned by other cities around New Zealand.

Endosulfan has been used to control earthworms on a Kamo soccer field and Cobham Oval, but an anti-spray campaigner says it is linked to birth defects, breast and testicular cancer and Parkinson's disease.

Dr Meriel Watts of the Pesticide Action Network said endosulfan remained in the soil for up to six years and should be avoided.

She said New Zealand was the only country she knew of that sprayed it on sports fields.

"People use sports fields all the time. It's a serious risk to humans and animals. The chemical evaporates off the soil and plants ... It will drift in the wind and people nearby will inhale it. Any skin, hand, or mouth contact with soil could cause harm."

She said the pesticide disrupted the food chain and had been found in fish, dairy and meat.

Tauranga City Council stopped using endosulfan in September this year after residents protested and Auckland City Council switched to a safer alternative in 1999.

Dr Watts said Auckland was now using iron or ammonium sulphate, which was nowhere near as toxic and worked by making the soil more acidic.

"It doesn't kill the worms, they just don't like it - and it does the job," Dr Watts said.

However, Whangarei District Council parks technical officer Aubrey Gifford said the alternatives to endosulfan were not cost effective. It was used only on rare occasions and stopped worms from digging soil up on to the sand cover of sports fields.

The sand allowed the fields to drain, so sport could be played shortly after rain.

Sports fields were sprayed only when they were not in use between the winter and summer sports seasons, and the spray lasted in the soil for up to 70 days.

"We don't spray for fun. Cobham Oval faced the prospect of being mined by earthworms if it wasn't controlled. It's a catch-22 situation."

Kamo soccer field was sprayed in the mid-1990s and Cobham Oval was sprayed three weeks ago.

"There have been a number of reports of effective alternatives but in practice this hasn't been the case. They just make the earthworms go deeper."

Dr Watts questioned the cost-effectiveness argument.

"What matters more? Finding a cheap way of controlling worms or looking after people's health?"

Wayne Temple of the National Poisons Centre said Erma was reviewing endosulfan because of tighter restrictions overseas.

Erma is the government agency which makes decisions on introducing hazardous substances and new organisms to New Zealand.

Organic chlorine insecticides such as endosulfan were being phased out because of their environmental effects, Dr Temple said. The World

Health Organisation had classified it as a moderate hazard and was encouraging countries to review its use.

The insecticide's persistence in the environment was a greater concern than toxic effects on humans, Dr Temple said.

"Having said that, we should be looking at substituting endosulfan with an environmentally friendly option which still has efficacy on target species."

Northland Medical Officer of Health Jonathan Jarman said he could not comment in specific terms about the use of endosulfan at Cobham Oval without knowing the exact circumstances.

However, he was uncomfortable about the use of endosulfan so close to the harbour. Studies showed it could get into groundwater and be spread by spray drift.

"Endosulfan is known to be toxic to the aquatic environment and it accumulates in fish. Fish can also bioconcentrate it by up to 1000 times," said.

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