Dispatch from Geneva 2: Meet the industry!

Oct 13, 2010 by Karl Tupper

Industry's dirty defense of endosulfan

The POPRC meeting in Geneva continues, but there's not much news to report on endosulfan today. So I thought that today it would be interesting to give a run down of who is here to defend the insecticide.

Usual Suspects

The most vocal of the bunch is probably S. Ganesan, general manager of Excel Crop Care. Ganesan is supported by his colleague R. Harihan, an Excel VP. The company produces 5500 tons of endosulfan annually — about quarter of world production — according to information submitted by Ganesan to the Stockholm Convention. Nearly as disruptive as Ganesan is Dr. Tirthankar Basu, from Hindustan Insecticides Limited (1600 tons/year).

While these guys certainly have a right to be here to defend their product, the steps they've taken to conceal their affliations are troubling. Officially, Ganesan is here as a representative of the Indian Chemical Council, not Excel, and this is what his name tag says and how he introduces himself. He also distributes information under the guise of Conventions Watch Desk and the aptly-named Endosulfan Manufacturers and Formulators Welfare Association. Harihan is officially from the Orwellianly named International Stewardship Centre (ISC). But the most brazen is Basu. Incredibly, he is here as an official member of the Indian delegation. His company, HIL, is government owned, so apparently this qualifies him for a government badge. When he speaks, his words carry the weight of the Indian government, even though he is really a chemical industry executive.

New U.S. Players - of DDT Fame

Lest you think these shenanigans are confined to the Indian industry, allow me to introduce Mr.

Chuck Hanson, Executive Director of ISC. Listening to him deliver a five minute speech last night on why endosulfan should not be eliminated, I was inspired to find out more about ISC. A little digging turned up this, a U.S. Patent & Trade Office record showing that Velsicol Chemical Corporation owns the ISC trademark, and a little more digging reveals that Hanson is a VP at Velsicol. The Illinois-based company doesn't make endosulfan, so what's their dog in this fight? It turns out that Velsicol is the sole U.S. manufacturer hexachlorocyclopentadiene (HCCPD), the key starting material in the synthesis of endosulfan (as well as several pesticides already listed in the Stockholm Convention like aldrin, dieldrin, chlordane, heptachlor, and mirex.) Of course nothing in the way Hanson presents himself here indicates his direct connection to the endosulfan industry.

If the name Velsicol sounds familiar, it's for good reason. Velsicol, formerly called the Michigan Chemical Company, was a major U.S. manufacturer of DDT (another Stockholm-listed chemical) and their former facility on the banks of the Pine River in St. Louis, Michigan, is now a superfund site. Michigan Chemical Company was also responsible for contaminating animal feed in Michigan with polybrominated biphenyls (PPBs, yet another Stockholm-listed chemical) in the 1970s. Livestock across the state were sickened or killed; ultimately 30,000 cattle and 1.5 million chickens had to be culled.

I first heard about Velsicol and the Michigan PBB disaster when I traveled Alma College, near the Velsicol superfund site in Michigan, for the Eugene Kenaga International DDT Conference. Ever since, I've wondered what happened to Velsicol. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised to learn that they are still involved in the production of persistent organic pollutants like endosulfan, and that they're here in Geneva, diligently working to undermine the goals of the Stockholm Convention, a treaty that has already banned so many of their products. Let's hope we can add endosulfan to that long list.

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