

# TOXIC WARNING SIGNALS



**W**hen NCAMP launched its *Toxic Warning Signals and Alternatives Project* we wanted to put a human face on the pesticide poisoning epidemic in the U.S. Regulatory agencies prefer to deal in statistics of acceptable risk and harm. They rationalize the numbers of pesticide-caused cancers, neurological disorders, organ failures, behavioral effects, reproductive problems and deaths as reasonable in light of pesticide benefits. We thought if we could put the poisoned human faces before state and federal regulators and politicians we might begin to get somewhere.

Often poisoning incidents are dismissed by EPA as a matter of misuse perpetrated by bad actors in an otherwise sound pesticide use and regulatory system. What emerges, however, from the daily public reports are unrealistic and unfounded regulatory assumptions regarding (i) how pesticides are typically used, (ii) user and public understanding about the potential hazards of pesticides, (iii) the inability to control pesticide drift, (iv) the unresponsiveness of state enforcement agencies, and (v) user and public knowledge of the alternatives to toxic chemicals for pest management.

The continued rationalization of 4.5 billion pounds of pesticide use annually makes the *Toxic Warning Signals and Alternatives Project* absolutely necessary on an ongoing basis. We collect the sad facts on our Pesticide Incident Report form. We take the facts and publicize them, share them with regulatory officials and the media, help people find more facts, litigate, and build a base of political power to turn this situation around.

We are now reaching out to people with NCAMP's new website and webpage *How to Avoid Pesticide Injury (and what to do if you can't)*, which is published here. Thanks to long-term NCAMP board member Terry Shistar, who herself endures the frequent assault of pesticides while living with her family in Kansas, we are effectively reaching out with the webpage she designed. Shortly, we will post NCAMP's incident forms, as a means of collecting an even greater volume of reports. On the flip side, NCAMP is collecting Alternative Success Reports, which illustrate that the hazards people endure are unnecessary in light of the viability of alternatives.

It is painful to hear all the stories that people bring to NCAMP, not being able in most cases to offer adequate relief, not being able to fix the serious adverse effects. With *Toxic*

*Warning Signals* we believe that we can together amass the strength as a nation to stop the daily assault and begin to prevent pest problems and when they occur address them in a safer way.

What follows are some of the reports we have received recently. Let us hear from you or someone you know.

## Here is what we are hearing:

### Homeowners in rural Louisiana were poisoned after their home was treated for termites.

"I need to get my voice heard on the matter of pesticide poisonings. We were exposed to Dursban™, permethrin and others we have not identified due to the company not furnishing us with the application slips when the chemicals were applied. A national pesticide treatment company (Terminix)

treated our home for termites. The person told us that there was no problem and that we could stay in the house during and after the treatment. This guy trenched around the outside perimeter of the house and sprayed these chemicals from 8:30 am to 5:30 pm. What he really did was flood the underneath of the house until the fumes entering the inside overcame me. He was too large a person to crawl around the piers and the bond beam around the perimeter of the house. We called the LA Department of Agriculture. No one wants to listen. We finally found the company franchise owner who flew out to meet with us. He had an attorney draw up a purchase contract to buy our home and 2 1/2 acres. After receiving these documents he wanted us to sign a document releasing him of all liability. We then refused the sale. This occurred back in 1993 and

now we are being forced to settle the claims on our house and tort damages in arbitration hearing. My wife and I have been found to have medical problems including chemical encephalopathy, visual and strength loss and other findings. I am no longer able to handle this and am in a state of depression with no more strength to continue fighting."

### A New York homeowner also writes about a termite application gone bad.

"Your organization has provided me helpful, relevant information regarding our situation, for which we are grateful!





We had our residence treated for termites by Terminix twice in 1996. To make for a good story, we now have a major infestation. At first we had what appeared to us as flying ants, a half dozen or so. Saw the commercial for a free inspection and took them up on it. Naturally the sales pitch had our house falling down if we didn't get treatment immediately. We bought it hook, line and sinker, to preserve the value of our property. After each treatment, injected through/in cinder blocks, we had leakage of the chemical the following day and a strong odor (particularly in the winter of 1996-97) that still is sporadically present in our home. We were given a product label for Equity™. With a 3-year-old son I am phobic of any toxic substances and told the salesman such. Cleverly, he said one thing and did another. Numerous calls, over 50 during that period, left me assured that the chemical was harmless because of its innocuous inert ingredients. Numerous swarms were noticed in January, which had never occurred prior to the [initial] treatments. After a month or so of re-inspections, the regional management referred us to a local company and Orkin, [who] would take care of the problem. The Orkin rep walked in and with his twenty-five years in the business immediately identifies a "misapplication." Told me, by the odor, Equity™ was not used but Dursban TC™. Our cinder block foundation was pumped full from the inside, which is illegal in New York State, and no ventilation was installed or plastic covering laid in an elevated sub-floor area, to prevent the chemicals from coming up into our living quarters. We got in touch with our Department of Environmental Conservation/ECON. We still [had] no resolution, living in the home because ECON does not have enough "factual" information to say it's unsafe. Air testing this past summer found we have as much as 720 ppm of chemicals like benzene, xylene and toluene, just to name a few of those "innocuous inerts." My wife has had two miscarriages and my son now is a likely candidate for leukemia. We are preparing a civil lawsuit for the toxic tort aspect of this offense. The numerous violations documented by the state official who inspected our property will result in nothing more than Terminix doing what they should have done during the initial treatment (plastic & ventilation, which I have already installed). We still have the chemical odor and are currently in the process of moving out.

I am sure this is not the first horror story you have heard and most likely not the last. But to my family and me it has disrupted our life and most certainly our future. Keep up the good work on behalf of those 'unheard voices'."

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### **Office workers in Virginia got sick after a termite treatment of their building.**

An office worker on the first floor of a building, built on a slab, inhaled vapors from a termite application to the building with Dursban TC™. She reports that, "People were drilling holes in concrete sidewalks and applying pesticide. We started feeling ill for days afterwards." There was no warn-

ing, no precautions taken. A complaint was filed with the Virginia Department of Agriculture. Another worker writes that she has been tested, and the test shows "below normal cholinesterase levels in blood serum eight weeks after application." She reports having flu-like symptoms since the incident. The chemical was described as drifting in from outside and possibly seeping into the flooring of the ground floor.

Another worker reports that she "began choking and feeling mentally disoriented, burning eyes and throat." She smelled the product. She says, "I was sick for about a month and a half with intermittent nausea." When the state enforcement agency was called, she was told that they couldn't sample the air, only soil, and that "their job is to protect consumers from fraudulent business claims, such as saying they used Dursban™ when they really used water." She was also told by a state official that the "odor we kept smelling for weeks was "only the petroleum distillates used as solvents." No investigation was done by the state.

### **A homeowner in New Jersey developed skin problems after using a weed chemical.**

He applied a herbicide in a spray bottle and was exposed on his skin. Although he used rubber gloves, there was a pinhole in one finger that allowed the chemical into the glove and in contact with the skin. Now he reports, "I have a chronic skin inflammation on my right thumb and forefinger." He is under doctor's care and indicates that he was led to believe that pesticides were safe.

### **A woman in upstate New York reports routine spraying by "ChemLawn and small operators" resulting in sickness.**

She reports spraying by lawn care companies under all weather conditions, including windy days. She is not notified before or when pesticides are being used. She says she "smelled it in and outside of the house and was made ill upon breathing the



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fumes." The spraying has caused her to get dizzy and weak and suffer heart irregularity. While she is reporting a specific incident, she describes this as a daily occurrence.

### **Past pesticide use reported in North Dakota continues to poison**

An NCAMP member writes, "When I was growing up on our farm in northeast Ramsey County, North Dakota, in the mid-40s, it was common throughout our community to spray the milk cows daily during the fly season. It was done with a kerosene-based DDT pesticide solution to control the fly problem. I have just found out recently that instead of using the oil, or kerosene spray solution regularly, we should have only used it infrequently.

In their book, *DDT-Killer or Killers*, published in 1946, authors O.T. Zimmerman and Irvin Lavine (formerly head of Chemical Engineering, UND) advise on page 111 as follows: "For direct application to the animals, the oil solution, of course, should not be used, but either the emulsion or the dispersion of wettable powder, applied as a spray at the rate of about one quart per adult horse or cow, will effectively control the horn fly as well as other flies for a few weeks or more."

So beginning in about 1946, and continuing for a period of several years, I and all other children in my farming community were exposed to a potent toxic substance on a daily basis during the fly season. It would enter our bodies through our skin, because the organic solvent dissolves the natural oils that protect against dermal transmission. We drank it in our milk, we ate it in our butter, we ate it in the meat, and we breathed the spray mist.

Since 1977, many friends from my rural childhood community have died. Several from various types of cancers, others from liver problems, heart disease and brain aneurysms. DDT was banned in 1972. Now, whether my friends' deaths were related to our misuse of DDT when we were children or not I don't know, but I suspect so and wish someone would take a look at the possibility. By contrast, not a single city friend of my approximate age who was not exposed to DDT regularly as a child has died.

Before closing, I must make one important point. None of the adults in our community, of course, knew that we were causing harm to our animals by spraying them with kerosene-based DDT. If anyone had suspected that was the case, they also would have then understood that doing so would harm people, and it would have stopped. If anyone is responsible for

our misuse of DDT, it would have to be the manufacturer."

The poisoning continues. He writes, "If you live on a farm that has a barn on it that was used to house milk cows between 1946 and 1972, then you should know that it might be contaminated with the pesticide DDT. DDT has a half life of between 2 and 20 years. So, if the barn on your farm was sprayed with DDT, you might want to keep anyone, especially small children, from entering these barns until the Environmental Protection Agency has tested it to see if it is still toxic."

### **A man in Philadelphia, PA tells of spraying in his apartment.**

The spraying with diazinon for cockroaches in his apartment building has resulted in a strong persistent odor and health problems. The strong odor and resulting health problems provided the only notification of the pesticide's use. He reports, "The label says to dilute with water for residential use. I found full strength in a spray bottle used in the building." He was lead to believe that the pesticide was safe when he inquired.

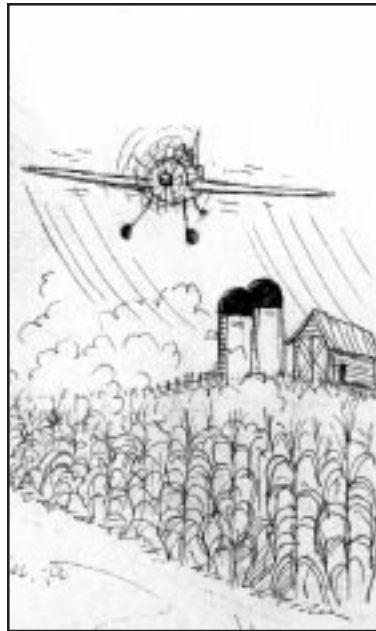
### **Teachers in a Florida school report spraying of school building and resulting illness.**

Several teachers report that the inside of their school was sprayed for roaches, ants and lice. When they returned to school after vacation, dead roaches were observed everywhere in the building. Teachers report being poisoned by getting pesticides on their skin, by breathing vapors and through the ingestion of residues on utensils. Individuals suffered from coughing and headaches. Five teachers are diagnosed as chemically sensitized. Three were approved for workman's compensation. Cans of malathion were observed in the building and a questionable combination of

pesticides were admittedly used within the school. While initial investigative reports by the state were released, the final report was not.

### **An individual in Pennsylvania reports contamination and poisoning after using moth repellents in home.**

After being led to believe that the pesticides he was about to use as a moth repellent in his home were safe, he used two chemicals that together formed a very toxic vapor. The chemicals were reported as naphthalene and paradichlorobenzene. According to the individual, "Both products (in fine print)





say do not use with another moth preventive chemical. It does not say that if you do, you create a lethal nerve gas which permeates everything and has no antidote." Scans on the individual reveal brain damage. "We have lost everything we owned, our house and all our personal belongings."

## From the malathion spray area for medfly in Florida, there are many reports of illness.

On the morning of June 10<sup>th</sup>, those of us who live on 29<sup>th</sup> Street, NW, considered in the buffer zone because of its proximity to the Manatee River, were sprayed with hoses full of malathion. Malathion was on everything including lawn chairs, cars, our children's toys. The stench of garlic was so strong that we had to cover our mouths and noses outside. My three neighbors and I happened to be there at the time and ran out to try and stop the sprayers. Some of us had placed "No Spray" signs on our doors which were ignored. Three of the adults exposed fell ill. We experienced tightness of chest, partial loss of vision, nausea, vomiting, dizziness, burning sensations on our tongues and skin.

The children arrived home from school a few hours later. The same children who started "Kids Who Care," a group of grade school age children who rallied to educate the community on malathion, fell ill that night. What happened on 29<sup>th</sup> Street and to all of Bradenton and Palmetto? What can we do to protect our children?

Children sickened by the application of malathion in Bradenton, Florida in the attempt to eradicate the medfly included 428 complaints that were called into the Department of Health. They dismissed many of them as being the "flu." Interestingly enough, these "flu-like" symptoms are standard for organophosphate exposure. People respond to malathion exposure differently as is noted below in a small group of children chosen over the many who fell ill.

- Sean, age 8, came home from school after all the trees and bushes had been hosed down with malathion. He played for a while outside but began to feel sick. By late afternoon he was sick to his stomach. His tongue began to burn and he developed a rash all over his body.
- Matthew, age 12, arrived home from school 3 hours after his home and the lot next to it were hosed down with malathion. He played outside for a while. As the night wore on he began to have flu-like symptoms with wheezing.
- Steven, age 10, played outside with his two brothers after school. By early evening, however, he felt so tired (extreme fatigue) that he cancelled his end of school overnight and

went to sleep at an unusually early hour.

- Eric, age 13, went swimming a few hours after his home was ground sprayed with hoses full of malathion. By evening he had developed a bad headache which was followed immediately after by a nosebleed.
- Samuel, age 10, played in a yard where the trees and bushes had been sprayed a few hours earlier with malathion. Symptoms a few hours later included a headache, sore neck and extreme fatigue.

## Farmworker death linked to pesticide exposure on the farm.

While riding his bike to the orchards where he worked, 17 year old Jose Antonio Casillas collapsed and died. When discovered by emergency workers he had white foam running from his nose and mouth, reported the *Salt Lake Tribune* on July 5, 1998. Casillas' uncles say that he was sprayed with

pesticides on June 20 while he was working in a peach orchard and complained of an intense headache. He was soaked again by pesticides from a spray tractor on June 26, the day before his death. After the last exposure, Casillas' uncle said the boy began "vomiting, sweating, suffering from diarrhea and complaining of more headaches." The symptoms he experienced are consistent with pesticide poisoning. Todd Grey, the state's chief medical examiner who performed the autopsy said, "Exposure to various pesticides is very hard to prove...I may get a negative toxicology report, but it does not prove that someone did not die from exposure to pesticides." Casillas had no training about the dangers of pesticides and did not know that



they are poisonous. Antonio Guerra, an outreach worker for the Utah Farmworker Health Program said, "He was so healthy, he was strong...He lifted weights, he rode his bike; after work when everyone else was exhausted he played soccer. Then one day he just dies?"

## Send in your experiences to NCAMP. Together change will happen.

Please help us prevent more harm to people and the environment. Send NCAMP your story or the story of someone you know by using NCAMP's Pesticide Incident Form, Ecological Effects Report or Alternative Success Report. Contact NCAMP, 701 E Street, SE, Washington, DC 20003, 202-543-5450, 202-543-4791 (fax), e-mail: [ncamp@ncamp.org](mailto:ncamp@ncamp.org), or find the forms on NCAMP's website: <http://www.ncamp.org>.