Letter from Washington

Globalization, Democracy and Chemical Weapons

As our attention is drawn daily to the international stage with events in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Middle East and concerns about terrorism, we are constantly reminded of the effect that global politics has on our lives. We live in a global village. In this context, we hear a lot about democracy and weapons of mass destruction, including chemical weapons. We are reminded of the promise and opportunities that democratic institutions offer to solve problems and address injustices. We support democracy and we oppose the weapons of mass destruction. We believe that our democratic values can be put to work for the protection of people and the environment and against such horrors as chemical weapons. Yes, but. . .

Fighting for Democracy and the Environment

In reading the globalization piece in this issue (*see page 13*), "The Fight for Fair (and Safe) Trade," (which reprints parts of a report entitled *Civilizing Globalization* by Michelle Swenarchuk of the Canadian Environmental Law Association), you can't get very far without coming to the conclusion that the 140 governments around the world, including the U.S., have signed on to a multilateral trading system, governed by the World Trade Organization (WTO), that thwarts the democratic process. WTO, the main international forum for preventing barriers to international trade, is an un-elected body that is heavily influenced by corporate interests and unwilling to allow public involvement in its decision making process. Democratic, it is not.

As a member of WTO, the U.S. therefore is supporting an institution that runs contrary to the principles of democracy, the same principles we as a nation support and at least rhetorically promote around the world. That means the democratic institutions and policy making bodies that we utilize in the U.S. to develop health and environmental protection are undermined by WTO, as is the health and safety of the public. The British newspaper, The Observer, said it: *"The World Trade Organization [WTO] has plans to replace that outmoded political idea: democracy."* The former Speaker Pro Tem of the California Assembly and California legislators, faced with a lawsuit for phasing out the gas additive MTBE (methyl tertiary butyl), said:

We find it disconcerting that our democratic decision making regarding this important public health issue is being second-guessed in a distant forum by un-elected officials….Secondly, we as California legislators, find it problematic to be told by remote and un-elected trade officials what paradigms or standards we must apply in writing environmental and public health laws for the people of our state. We further believe that since decisions about the level of risk to which a populace shall be exposed are ultimately a matter of values, such decisions are best made by elected officials in accessible and democratic fora.

WTO policy as currently structured inherently rejects the *precautionary principle* of avoiding harmful products/processes when there are scientific uncertainties regarding their risk or cause and effect. And yet, in a world of epidemic cancer rates and skyrocketing asthma rates, to name two, precaution is exactly what should be embraced as a matter of policy.

Chemical Weaponry at Home

That brings us to chemical weapons. We know they have no place in a humane world. We believe that they do not even have a place in war. In 1997, the U.S. Senate ratified a global chemical weapons ban along with 80 other nations. Yet, when you look at what these chemicals are, you find that we are using a form of them to the tune of 5 billion pounds a year here in the U.S. We are using them as pest control weapons, and their low-level ubiquitous levels in the environment are contributing to long-term adverse health effects ranging from neurological disorders to cancer. Most of the chemical weapons in the form of blister agents, nerve agents, choking agents and blood agents either have commercial pesticidal uses or are precursor chemicals to pesticide products. Tabun, an organophosphate like many pesticides, is considered among the easiest of nerve gases to manufacture, even in the non-industrialized world. At press time, it was reported that researchers at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California have demonstrated that organophosphate pesticides and related chemical weaponry cause a genetic effect that is linked to neurological disorders. The finding, published in the March 17, 2003 online version of *Nature Genetics*, identifies a gene that scientists had not previously studied in connection with these chemicals and diseases such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and the Gulf War syndrome.

The March for Solutions

It is clear that we have some work to do; that we must make our voices heard. We must continue to support our right to incorporate values that respect health and the environment into our laws and protect children and other vulnerable population groups, even at the expense of trade profits. As a part of that process, we must continue with local and state efforts that stop the daily pesticide assault or what amounts to chemical weaponry in our communities for farming, mosquito management or lawn maintenance. We must build up democratic institutions and processes and tear down those that reject democratic principles. This issue of PAY, like others, gives us the tools in engage at the community level in efforts that move us away from pesticide use and exposure and toward safer alternatives.

—*Jay Feldman* is executive director of Beyond Pesticides.