

PRESS RELEASE

A Rural Idyll?

Government sees video evidence of people from all over the country poisoned by pesticides sprayed on crops as campaigner makes an “unarguable case” for a move away from chemical farming methods

A prominent pesticide campaigner has produced a “hard-hitting” video to show the Government the reality of exactly what is happening in the countryside from the continued use of pesticides and other hazardous chemicals in agriculture and the long-term consequences and devastating effects on people living in rural areas.

Georgina Downs has conducted a determined campaign to change Government Policy that has at last forced this matter into the public arena. She decided to make the video after receiving emails and letters from people all over the country reporting acute and chronic long-term ill-health effects following exposure(s) to pesticides sprayed on nearby fields. The most common illnesses reported include clusters of cancers, (especially breast cancer among rural women) leukaemia, ME and asthma and Ms. Downs points out that a recent European initiative has finally acknowledged that pesticides are possibly related to immunological effects, endocrine-disrupting effects, neurotoxic disorders and cancer.

Ms. Downs says, *“People move to the countryside thinking it will be a healthy environment to bring up their children and do not know about the dangers and risks inherent in the spraying of poisonous chemicals on surrounding fields, until they themselves suffer adverse effects on their health.”*

For the last 2 years Ms. Downs has investigated the history of crop-spraying and the whole regulatory system for pesticides. In her submission to the recent DEFRA Consultation on crop-spraying she has made an *“unarguable case”* for a move away from intensive chemical farming methods. Her submission is supported by overwhelming evidence from around the world demonstrating the dangers of pesticides, including from Government’s very own documentation.

One man featured in both Ms. Downs’ video and the forthcoming programme *“That’s Esther,”* is John Elson who used to be the vicar of a rural Sussex village. About 15 years ago John was caught in a cloud of pesticides that were being sprayed on the adjoining field that resulted in permanent damage to his health. Ms. Downs asks John why he thinks the Government appears to be so reluctant to admit the damage that pesticides are causing. John says *“I suppose probably because it hasn’t happened to anyone’s knowledge in their backyard, I mean if they had the spraying in the fields next to their house and one of their family was affected, I would imagine something would be done pretty quickly.”*

Nicola Plowman who lives in Lincolnshire, one of the most heavily industrialised agricultural counties in the country, describes to Ms. Downs how not only does she live near to sprayed fields, but the public playing field near her 6 year old daughter’s school is surrounded on 4 sides by fields that are heavily sprayed. Nicola says *“It seems extraordinary that this is a facility for young children with vulnerable immune systems and they’re being regularly exposed to these poisons.”*

Another lady, who lives in Suffolk, was diagnosed with breast cancer, a year after being exposed from the spraying of a nearby field and her dog, exposed at the same time, later died of the disease. She tells Ms. Downs about the clusters of various cancers in a number of the villages in her area. She states *“It just*

seems to be too much of a coincidence all the people and animals getting cancer and that's just cancer, we're not talking about other diseases."

Ms. Downs states that the current regulations are totally obstructive and make it almost impossible to prove causation, as currently members of the public are not entitled to access the information on the chemicals they are exposed to and nor can their doctors. Yet this information is vital for the correct assessment and treatment of anyone who suffers adverse health effects. However, she points out that even with the chemical information, doctors are not trained to recognise the effects of pesticides.

Margaret Reichlin, from Hampshire, also featured on Ms. Downs' video echoes this and says that one doctor she saw told her *"We don't know anything about chemicals, what do you expect us to do about them?"*

Ms. Downs has called for a ban on crop-spraying within a certain distance of human habitation. She says *"Once dispersed pesticides are airborne contaminants and can travel in the air considerable distances resulting in widespread toxic air pollution. Studies have shown pesticide particles located miles away from where they were originally applied. Recent scientific research from California has calculated risks within a 1.5 to 3 mile radius of pesticide treated areas. Therefore a small buffer zone is not going to be adequate or in anyway acceptable to protect residents from the high level of risk inherent in the spraying of agricultural chemicals or prevent contamination of their land. It should be at least a mile, although based on the evidence that I have seen and presented to the Government, even this distance is likely to be inadequate."*

Ms. Downs states that it is now up to the UK Government and the EU to take decisive action on this issue and to combine the urgent need to protect public health and the countryside with societal and consumer demand for pesticide free food. She says *"The Government has to accept the evidence of what is happening in reality, as maintaining the status quo and allowing this situation to continue is completely unacceptable and cannot be justified on any grounds. The move away from chemical dependency to sustainable non-chemical and natural farming methods can only be encouraged and authorised by Central Government."*

Alarming footage from Ms. Downs' previous video that utilised dummies at the edge of her property to catalogue the multiple exposures to poisonous chemicals that could be experienced over just a one month period will be featured on the ITV programme "That's Esther," on Sunday January 25th, at 12.30pm. (NB. This programme was filmed in May last year and therefore prior to the DEFRA Consultation).

— **Notes to editors** ----

- Pesticides are poisonous chemicals and are extremely hazardous to human health
- In a recent European Commission Communication "A European Environment and Health Strategy," (the SCALE initiative) it states that *"Pesticides are possibly related to immunological effects, endocrine-disrupting effects, neurotoxic disorders and cancer."*
- The principle aim of pesticide regulation in the UK is supposed to be the protection of public health

- There is no legal obligation for farmers to notify anyone of any intended spraying application or to supply information on the chemicals being used, regardless of whether adverse health effects have been suffered
- At the present time a crop-sprayer is legally allowed to repeatedly spray mixtures of poisonous chemicals right up to the open window of any occupied premises whether it be a resident's home, a school (nursery, infant, primary etc.) a home for the elderly or disabled or any office or workplace.
- Ms. Downs has lived next to regularly sprayed fields for 20 years. She was invited by Professor David Coggon, Chairman of the Government's Advisory Committee on Pesticides to present a paper entitled "*Why the bystander risk assessment does not equate to real-life exposure scenarios*," for their Open Meeting on July 10th 2002. The paper and transcripts of the meeting can be found at www.pesticides.gov.uk
- Ms. Downs also produced a video illustrating chemical exposure that was also presented at the ACP meeting and is available upon request
- Ms. Downs met with Lord Whitty and Michael Meacher on December 17th 2002 and with Alun Michael on December 17th 2003 to present her case for a change in the regulations and legislation governing agricultural spraying. She has called for a ban on crop-spraying and the use of pesticides near to people's homes, schools, workplaces and any other places of human habitation and for the introduction of a new legal obligation to warn people before spraying and to provide the necessary chemical information
- Ms. Downs' campaign was featured on The Food Police BBC1 March 26th; The Observer on April 13th ("*Georgina's Fight Against Toxic Peril*" and "*Can We Have a Breath of Fresh Air?*") on Farming Today BBC Radio 4 on March 25th and May 3rd; (NB. The HSE admitted on this programme that it has absolutely no idea how many people in the countryside are actually suffering from ill-health that's related to pesticides) and in various other media
- DEFRA launched a Consultation on Crop-spraying on July 21st 2003. The DEFRA News Release and Consultation links are at: www.defra.gov.uk/news/2003/030721a.htm The Consultation Information is available at: <http://www.pesticides.gov.uk/applicant/aahip/aah10320.htm>
- Further information in relation to Ms. Downs' video featuring people from all over the country poisoned by pesticides sprayed on crops entitled "*Pesticide Exposures for People in Agricultural Areas – Part 2 The Hidden Costs*" is available on request
- Further information in relation to Ms. Downs submission to the Government's Consultation "*Proposals for the Introduction of No-spray zones between spraying areas and residential properties in England and Wales*" is available on request

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