

Lab Rats for Corporate Profit: Pesticide Industry's Poisoned Platter

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Newly released pesticide usage statistics for 2018 confirm that the British people are being used as lab rats. That's the message environmentalist Dr Rosemary Mason has sent to Dave Bench, senior scientist at the UK Chemicals, Health and Safety Executive and director of the agency's EU exit plan. In her open letter to Bench, Mason warns that things could get much worse.

In 2016, the UK farming minister said that the nation could develop a more flexible approach to environmental protection free of "spirit-crushing" Brussels directives if it votes to leave the EU. George Eustice, the minister in question, said that the EU's precautionary principle needed to be reformed in favour of a US-style 'risk-based' system that would allow for faster approvals.

There is little doubt that Eustice had GM crops in mind: the Department of Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) says that the most promising crops suitable for introducing to England would be Roundup Ready GA21 glyphosate-tolerant crops as they synergise well with herbicides already widely used in the UK.

Similarly, Boris Johnson said in his first speech as prime minister in July 2019:

"Let's start now to liberate the UK's extraordinary bioscience sector from anti-genetic modification rules and let's develop the blight-resistant crops that will feed the world."

However, the 'GM will feed the world mantra' is pure industry spin. The technology has a questionable record and, anyhow, there is already enough food being produced to feed the global population, yet around [830 million](#) are classed as hungry and two billion experience micronutrient deficiency. If Johnson wants to 'feed the world', he would do better by looking of the inbuilt injustices of the global food regime which is driven by the very corporations he seems to be in bed with.

Conservative politicians' positive spin about GM is little more than an attempt to justify a post-Brexit trade deal with Washington that will effectively incorporate the UK into the US's regulatory food regime. The type of 'liberation' Johnson really means is the UK adopting unassessed GM crops, using more glyphosate (or similar agrochemicals) and a gutting of food safety and environmental standards. It is no secret that various Conservative-led administrations have wanted to ditch the EU regulatory framework on GM for some time.

Unregulated chemical cocktail

Mason asks Bench why Defra and the Chemicals Regulation Division refuse to ban glyphosate-based herbicides in Swansea between 2014-2017 when she told them that it was poisoning her nature reserve:

“Analysis of local tap water in August 2014 revealed a 10-fold increase since August 2013: from 30 ppt to 300 ppt. I told them that these were of the order of concentrations found in a laboratory study in 2013 that showed that breast cancer cell proliferation is accelerated by glyphosate in extremely low concentrations. We had several neighbours who have recently developed breast cancer. Now, in 2019, with many scientific papers reporting apocalyptic insect declines around the world, we are facing a global Armageddon; yet the public has no idea, because the press has concealed it from them.”

Bench is also asked:

“Have you seen the pesticides usage statistics for 2018? They confirm what a European NGO said in 2013, that the British citizens are being used as lab rats!”

Mason continues:

“Dave Bench, you presented a paper at the Soil Association meeting on 20 November 2017... [it] showed that pesticide active ingredients applied to three British crops had increased between 6-18 fold between 1974 and 2016, rather than halved as farmers and industry had claimed!! As well as hearing this new evidence of increased pesticide use in the UK, the conference heard new scientific evidence from around the world showing that very low doses of pesticides, well below official ‘safety’ levels, pose a significant risk to public health via our food supply.

“Were you shocked? Presumably you weren’t because you described the regulatory system for pesticides as robust and as balancing the risks of pesticides against the benefits to society. That statement is rubbish. It is for the benefit of the agrochemical industry. The industry (for it is the industry that does the testing, on behalf of regulators) only tests one pesticide at a time, whereas farmers spray a cocktail of pesticides, including over children and babies, without warning.”

Ian Boyd, the former Chief Scientific Adviser to Defra, says pesticides, once they have been authorised, are never reviewed.

Mason adds there is consistent denial by the National Farmers Union (NFU), Defra and the agrochemical industry about the massive amounts of pesticides used on farmland and herbicides used in towns and cities on weeds; and there is silence from the UK corporate media.

She informs Bench that although glyphosate was relicensed in Europe by a “corrupt” group of individuals, it is distributed to every organ of the body and has multiple actions: it is an herbicide, an antibiotic, a fungicide, an antiprotozoal, an organic phosphonate, a growth regulator, a toxicant, a virulence enhancer and is persistent in the soil. It chelates (captures) and washes out the following minerals: boron, calcium, cobalt, copper, iron, potassium, magnesium, manganese, nickel and zinc.

In her previous reports, as in her letter to Bench, Mason has documented the consequences of this for human health.

Just as concerning is the UN Global Chemicals Outlook II report that indicates large quantities of hazardous chemicals and pollutants continue to leak into the environment, contaminating food chains and accumulating in our bodies, where they do serious damage. Estimates by the European Environment Agency suggest that 62 per cent of the volume of chemicals consumed in Europe are hazardous to health. The World Health Organization estimates the burden of disease from selected chemicals at 1.6 million lives. The lives of many more are negatively impacted.

Business as usual: public health crisis

Mason goes on to highlight numerous disturbing aspects of the revolving door between the pesticide industry and public bodies/government in the UK. She also notes that David Cameron appointed Michael Pragnell, founder of Syngenta, to Cancer Research UK's (CRUK) board and awarded him a CBE in 2017 for services to cancer research.

Mason explains that the British government's UK life sciences strategy is dependent on funding from the pharmaceutical sector which has links with the pesticide industry. In 2011, CRUK started donating money (£450 million/year) to the government's 'Strategy for UK Life Sciences' while AstraZeneca (Syngenta's parent company) was providing 22 compounds to academic research to develop medicines in the UK. She argues that Syngenta's products cause diseases, while its parent company tries to cure them with synthetic chemicals. And CRUK is a willing enabler.

In 2014, the NFU, the Crop Protection Association (CPA) and Agricultural Industries Confederation (AIC) launched 'Healthy Harvest' to safeguard the crop protection pesticide toolbox. The NFU and the agrochemical companies have continually defended the use of pesticides for economic reasons and complain about any attempt to restrict the 320-odd at their disposal. CPA, AIC and the NFU commissioned Andersons to write a report: 'The effect of the loss of plant protection products on UK Agriculture and Horticulture'. Conveniently for the report's commissioners, Andersons predicted dire economic effects on UK farming if pesticides were to be restricted.

And it is not that these powerful interests do not have the government's full attention. Between May 2010 and the end of 2013, the Department of Health alone had 130 meetings with representatives of industry. According to Mason, it is business as usual and patently clear that the pesticides industry is being protected.

While continuing to ignore and side-line important scientific research findings which highlight inconvenient truths for government and the pesticide industry, prominent public officials and scientists as well as the media attempt to explain away all the diseases now affecting the UK as a result of individual behaviour: bad lifestyle choices.

In her [various reports](#), Mason has discussed the importance of the gut microbiome and the deleterious effects of glyphosate which result in various health issues, such as obesity and depression. By 2018, CRUK was claiming that obesity caused 13 different cancers, but Mason argues that contamination by residues from 123 different pesticides on the fruit and vegetables supplied to schools by the Department of Health is the real reason for childhood obesity - not biscuits or poor choices.

Each year, there are steady increases in the numbers of new cancers in the UK and increases in deaths from the same cancers with no treatments making any difference to the numbers. While certain prestigious research centres are lavished with funding, Mason argues their work merely serves to strengthen the pesticide and pharmaceutical industries and implies the entire process is little more than a profitable racket at the expense of public health.

In finishing, let us remind ourselves of what [the UN special rapporteur on the right to food, Hilal Elver, said](#) in 2017:

“The power of the corporations over governments and over the scientific community is extremely important. If you want to deal with pesticides, you have to deal with the companies...”

Baskut Tuncak, the UN’s special rapporteur on toxics, added:

“While scientific research confirms the adverse effects of pesticides, proving a definitive link between exposure and human diseases or conditions or harm to the ecosystem presents a considerable challenge. This challenge has been exacerbated by a systematic denial, fuelled by the pesticide and agro-industry, of the magnitude of the damage inflicted by these chemicals, and aggressive, unethical marketing tactics.”

There is a lot more valuable information in Rosemary Mason’s 10,000-word open letter to David Bench, including many references and citations in support of her claims. Readers are urged to access ‘[Pesticides usage statistics for 2018 prove that the British people are being used as lab rats](#)’ via the [academia.edu](#) website.

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