

Pesticides

years ago, tremendous progress has been made since then in identifying and measuring many contaminants that are present at very low levels in the environment.

Today, chemical analysts can easily measure chemicals in drinking water in quantities as minute as a few parts per trillion. Expressed in terms of time, this would correspond to one second per 32,000 years.

Since we are now able to detect such minute levels of chemicals, people tend to think the whole environment is polluted by dangerous levels of pesticides or other man-made chemicals. However, Mr. Speaker, that is not the case.

In this respect, it is important to realize that public health experts, toxicologists, biomathematicians and other experts responsible for assessing the impact of minute concentrations of contaminants on human health have not been able to keep pace in their research with what has been achieved by chemical analysts in detecting increasingly low levels of chemicals. We may therefore have to spend a lot more time and effort on this aspect of safety evaluation, before consultations by task forces with the general public can be productive.

Furthermore, new initiatives and directives will be necessary to guarantee the safest possible application of the latest contributions being made by biotechnology and genetic engineering to the already vast range of pest control products that may be used in Canada.

For instance, thanks to genetic engineering, it is now possible to develop agricultural plants that are capable of producing their own biological insecticide. This ability to kill insects is found in nature among certain types of bacteria. It follows that any new plan to improve the safety of pesticides will have to cover not only the conventional chemical pesticides but also these so-called biological pesticides.

I can assure the Hon. Member that this Government has already taken steps to incorporate the new technology in existing programs, to ensure that these products are safe and that further progress will be made in this respect.

The Hon. Member also said that it would be desirable to involve the public in the process. Public awareness of the presence of contaminants in the environment and of their potential negative impact has heightened considerably in recent years. In a democracy like ours, it is common practice for the Government to act on the public's informed concerns, and the most productive way to air such concerns has been within the context of public hearings conducted by special commissions.

In fact, both federal and provincial Governments have benefitted from the recommendations made by these commissions, whose terms of reference have included holding public hearings on matters related to pesticides safety and environmental solution.

The Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Wise), whose department is responsible for the registration of pesticides under the Pest Control Products Act, is assisted by the Advisory Council on

Pest Control which has just been created. This council can deal with a wide variety of problems related to the use of pesticides, and it can also hold public hearings.

The Minister of Agriculture is empowered as well to establish review boards to look into problems having to do with particular issues or specific pesticides. It should be noted that, under their mandate, such boards may also hold public hearings. As an example, Mr. Speaker, I might mention the Alachlor Review Board which is now holding public hearings on the harmful effects of this herbicide.

Mr. Speaker, it is quite relevant to point out that in recent years the provincial Governments have set up a number of royal inquiry commissions or other bodies with similar powers. These commissions held public hearings on the hazards of chemical pesticides and on the safer alternative now available, namely biotechnological products.

Finally I might recall that a meeting is scheduled for early 1987 when provincial Ministers concerned over pesticides and environmental contamination will express their views and make recommendations on this subject to their federal counterparts.

Considering that the Government wants all provinces to be in on this, it is too early to make final recommendations such as creating a national task force empowered to hold public hearings on the threat of pesticides and on alternative solutions, even before the provincial Governments have had an opportunity to express their views on this matter.

Once they have been consulted, we will seriously consider every option available to reduce the threat of pesticides and the contamination of the environment. This study will include measures designed to ascertain whether new biotechnological products developed through genetic research might be hazardous to human health and the environment.

Hopefully, Mr. Speaker, my brief remarks will be of some help to the Hon. Member.

● (1720)

[*English*]

Mr. Bill Blaikie (Winnipeg—Birds Hill): Mr. Speaker, I want to begin by expressing my support for the concept behind the motion introduced by the Hon. Member for Davenport (Mr. Caccia). I want to concentrate on a few specific issues with respect to the whole question of herbicides.

The case of the herbicide 2,4-D is but one example of the pressing need for real improvements in the control of pesticides in Canada. As far as I am concerned, this is a substance that evidence has shown should be banned.

Recent, well respected epidemiological studies in the United States show that 2,4-D is a likely carcinogen. A study by the National Cancer Institute has shown that Kansas farmers who had worked with products containing the chemical were six times more likely to develop non-Hodgkins lymphoma than farmers who did not use such products.