

Hokey Hooker chemicals

Fire ant pesticide flowing into Lake Ontario

NEW YORK (LNS-CUP) — A New York State chemical manufacturer is dumping large amounts of Mirex, a known carcinogen, into Lake Ontario, effectively contaminating the lake's large fish population.

The Hooker Chemical company, a subsidiary of Occidental Petroleum, claims it stopped production of the substance in 1967. But a recent New York Times investigation disclosed that over one pound a day of the highly dangerous substance — a huge amount for this chemical, flows into the lake through Hooker pipes.

Furthermore, a permit issued by the United States Environmental Protection Agency actually allowed Hooker to dump thousands of pounds of other highly toxic chemicals (among them PCB's) into the lake daily.

"To permit anything like this in a single day is incredible," one PEA scientist was quoted as saying. "I don't think I have ever seen a permit for this much junk. It has all the makings of a scandal."

The Times investigation also revealed that the State Department of Environmental Conservation was proceeding with plans to stock Lake Ontario with millions of salmon in spite of warnings about Mirex from scientists and others on their own staff.

Fish in Lake Ontario contain large amounts of Mirex, which then accumulates in humans who eat the contaminated fish. Yet the State's Environmental Protection Agency is also moving ahead with a \$10 million hatchery to produce salmon and trout for sports fishing, slated to bring money to the region's sagging economy. The fish will be stored in the contaminated waters of Lake Ontario. Mirex is a powerful chlorine compound — "the most persistent pesticide known," according to Bill Butler from the Environmental Defense Fund, a public interest law group which has been working on Mirex litigation for several years.

The pesticide was first introduced in 1946 to fight fire ants, an insect found in large numbers in the southern states. According to members of a cooperative Georgia farm, one of several community groups currently fighting the use of Mirex, the ants build high mounds and have a painful sting, but are relatively harmless.

Found to be carcinogenic in mice and rats, Mirex can degrade into Kepone, a highly toxic substance. Allied Chemical Company, which produced Kepone, is currently charged in a series of massive criminal and civil suits resulting from the pollution of Virginia waterways and workers' exposure

to the chemical.

Allied also produced Mirex, but has pulled out of its production to avoid possible lawsuits stemming from the chemical's hazards. It sold its only Mirex plant in Mississippi to that state last winter for \$1 to get rid of it.

"The major problem with Mirex is its long term toxicity," said Butler. Poured onto ground corn cob grits and mixed with soybean oil, Mirex is then sprayed by plane over 12 to 18 million acres of nine southern states.

"That's massive exposure," Butler told LNS. "It builds up in the food chain and gets into human food." Agricultural products from the south including beef, which has also been found to contain Mirex are shipped all over the United States.

From 40 to 50 per cent of all samples taken from human tissues in the states using Mirex have shown the chemical to include "levels above one part per million, which is really astonishing," reports Butler. And the chemical hasn't prevented the spread of fire ants.

Meanwhile, Mirex continues to spill into Lake Ontario from the Hooker plant, and the company remains silent. "Mirex is a hot potato," said Jerry Wildenfeld, Hooker's director of environmental

health, "and we are under strict orders to refer all inquiries to the public relations department."

The plant is reported to be storing 200,000 pounds of the chemical in its Niagara Falls plant, and though Hooker would like to get rid of it, no buyers have been found.

Now Hooker won't sell Mirex unless fully protected by an insurance company against possible damage suits and no insurance companies are interested.

"They can read the papers about Kepone as well as you or I," said Butler. "They know the Allied officials have already plead guilty to millions of dollars worth of civil fines."

The fire ant program has grown over the years to a political boondoggle involving millions of taxpayers' dollars. "It's a patronage system," is how Butler describes it.

"It's a way of getting the money down to the districts of the senior committee chairmen of the House and Senate agriculture committees and the appropriations committees — the Talmadges, the Stennieses, the Eastlands . . . These guys are the old line agricultural politicians that . . . rise to power in the agriculture and appropriations committees and vote themselves money to get rid of fire ants.

"The local powers get on the fire ant committees in each county, and

the money goes for trucks and helicopters and planes. Some of the agriculture commissioners have a private air force and that is used to disseminate Mirex."

On Friday, September 3, the EPA announced a tentative settlement which will result in the cancellation of Mirex production at the end of the year in its present formulation, and in a two-thirds diluted formulation by the end of next year. And not surprisingly, the House Appropriations Committee has already come up with a supplemental appropriation of half a million dollars to find an alternative to Mirex.

The Environmental Defense Fund, which has represented a number of southern residents against Mirex as well as several conservation groups, considers the EPA agreement a victory, although a compromise one.

"We're happy the EPA is getting rid of Mirex," Butler commented. "We're unhappy at the length of time of the phase out and we're unhappy at the amount of Mirex that can be used in the interval."

However, the problem of what to do about the long-lived chemical that has already entered the food chain, and is present in more than twice the amount allowed by federal guidelines in the 2.7 million pounds of sish sold annually out of Lake Ontario, remains to be solved.

York campus could be converted into industrial park, green belts built so York would look like a university

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St. James Town was a prime example. To salvage that neighbourhood, all he did was to rearrange the form a little bit but it was the same incredible bulk of housing and the same lack of facilities that was originally envisaged. It was just somewhat more attractive in terms of its packaging.

Crombie's whole style is to appear to be the honest broker by

putting together a more attractive package than the other guys — the other guys being the developers on the right with the money interests and the crazy radicals on the left. He's a very shrewd politician. That's the brush he's tried to paint us with, as being very irresponsible and not committed to working things out in a rational manner. He's tried to appropriate the middle ground and the role of the great compromiser. The problems is that

he doesn't know how to negotiate; when he compromises he compromises people right out of their boots, right out of their homes as it is in the St. James Town situation.

Of course Crombie did make a serious run for the Progressive Conservative federal leadership although it wasn't a public up front run. Then he had to make even more compromises to negotiate with the Bay Street power brokers. While he negotiated I'm sure he was trying to salvage as much operating latitude as mayor of the city as he could. But he failed. The consequence of that was this terrible, terrible child that was born — the Central Area Plan, which if it's carried out over the next few years will become an incredible delinquent, a real monstrosity.

So there was Crombie, at the peak of his municipal career, with this creation, the Central Area Plan, being opposed by every community group in downtown Toronto, and another couple of dozen throughout the city. So the way he handled it was to attack the reformers as being crazy, out to lunch, wild-eyed fanatics. All we had done was to sit down with all the community people we knew in the City of Toronto and worked with them to develop a plan that suited their needs.

EXCALIBUR: What do you see as the student's role and responsibility in the community?

SPARROW: One of the problems with universities is that back in the nineteenth century and early

twentieth century when most of the big universities were developed on this continent, most of them were built in-town. The way they distinguished themselves was by building elaborate temples of learning; for example the Gothic styles of architecture. It reflected the elitist nature that universities have always had. So that's why the University of Toronto has the funny kind of medieval style buildings. It was an attempt to distinguish itself from the rest of the community . . . and in the case of the University of Toronto it has certainly managed to do that.

In the case of the newer universities, they have mainly been developed in a suburban context on huge plots of land. The kind of buildings that house students are really of late twentieth century industrial design. If you were to move the students out and strip out most of the interiors of the buildings on the York campus, you could probably run a whole railway spur into the campus and convert it into some kind of industrial park. A lot of the other buildings are typical of the office buildings you'd find around a suburban transportation node. So there was some difficulty distinguishing the buildings, without making them more monolithic and massive, as being of some kind of institutional function. So what they did at most suburban campuses was to build huge green belts around the cluster of buildings.

York is quite typical of the modern university with its moat

around the campus. Given the type of neighbourhood that surrounds York, in the whole suburban wasteland context, it's not necessarily inappropriate; it's just a very defensive attitude.

The irony is that when York was planned, and of course it's still being planned, there was a golden opportunity to create a community focus in the suburbs instead of an insular institution. But they didn't; they created the island. As a consequence there is little communication between the university and the community though there are a fair number of York students who work with politicians in the City of Toronto.

EXCALIBUR: Don't you feel that York students could have more of an impact on the local community and promote more community involvement in the university in terms of the facilities it has to offer?

SPARROW: Of course the role of students changes as a result of economic circumstances, and their perceptions keep changing as well. There is a lot less student activism than there was a few years ago, and even taking away external things like the Viet Nam war which had a profound effect on people, there still would have been more activism at that time because of a common perception that there were some major changes going on in society. At present there's a whole inward-looking, introspective approach to people's lives, though I don't think it's a right wing move or anything.



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