

Pesticides foul air in P.E.I.

Study links contamination to potato spraying

By Kelly Toughill, ATLANTIC CANADA BUREAU

HALIFAX -- The air of Prince Edward Island is contaminated with toxic pesticides routinely sprayed on area potato farms, federal scientists have found.

Chemicals used to kill insects, fungus and weeds were discovered in the air of three small towns near Summerside during surveys conducted in the late 1990s by Environment Canada. One fungicide - a carcinogen called chlorothalonil - was detected at the end of a wharf in a community where potatoes aren't even grown.

The study was obtained by Earth Action, a local environmental group, through an access-to-information request.

"These tests prove beyond a doubt that people living near potato fields are routinely exposed to pesticides in the air they breathe," Earth Action founder Sharon Labchuk said yesterday.

"This means thousands of people . . . are breathing contaminated air."

Labchuk has led a crusade against heavy pesticide use on the island for years.

Prince Edward Island is one of the most intensely farmed areas of Canada, with potatoes grown inside the city limits of both Charlottetown and Summerside.

Pesticide runoff from fields has been blamed for repeatedly killing the wildlife in local rivers and along shorelines, but the federal study is the first proof that the chemicals are also contaminating the air.

Ivan Noonan, general manager of the P.E.I. Potato Board, said yesterday he hadn't seen the report.



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Ivan Noonan, general manager of the P.E.I. Potato Board, said yesterday he hadn't seen the report.

"It's hard to blame an industry that's been in business for over a century," he said.

"Growers have just come through a devastating hard winter, with the heaviest snow yet and a drought this year," he added. "The problem is it raining in very dense in people's lives. On a scale of one to 10, it's a six-pointing."

Ted Fraser, head of the quality and production committee for the provincial government, said he was only vaguely aware of the study that was the basis of the report.

"There's always been a concern about what atmospheric pesticides might be, but we've not done a lot of work to find out what's in the air," he said.

Fraser said he didn't know the study started until 1999, or if the chemicals pose a danger to people.

One of the chemicals detected at very low levels was a fungicide called chlorothalonil. The U.S. government classifies the fungicide as a probable carcinogen, saying it can cause cancer and other ailments. It is particularly dangerous if inhaled and if it enters reproductive systems.

"The federal government should review its policy," Labchuk said.

The E.C. President never is only allowed to use chemicals to control weeds, which is why it's not used in the open air. The President never also has a number of other uses, including a use for the control of insects.

The P.E.I. study showed chlorothalonil at a low level near the shore in All Saints, Summerside, and found the results in the other two towns in a separate study of an area of the island.

Labchuk said she and her group were surprised to find that the study found chlorothalonil in the air of Summerside, a town that is not a potato growing area. "It's a surprise because we thought it would only be found in potato growing areas," she said.

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“I breathe the same air as Sharon Labchuk breathes and I'm not worried,” he said.

“Growers have just come through tremendously hard times, with the border closed last year and a drought this year,” he added. “The problem she is raising is very minor in people's lives. On a scale of one to 10, it's a negative.”

Tod Fraser, head of air quality and hazardous materials for the provincial government, said he was only vaguely aware of the study that one of his staff helped co-ordinate.

“There's always been a concern about what airborne levels of pesticides might be, so someone just decided to conduct a little study to see if anything was there,” he said.

Fraser said he didn't know why the study stopped after 1999, or if the chemicals pose a danger to people.

One of the chemicals detected at every sampling site is a fungicide called chlorothalonil.

The U.S. government classifies the fungicide as a probable carcinogen, saying it can cause severe eye and skin irritation, that it is particularly dangerous if inhaled and that it may cause reproductive problems.

PULL QUOTE: `The federal government should review its policy'

The U.S. Forestry Service is only allowed to use chlorothalonil in conditions where it won't drift outside the spray area. The Forestry Service also bans its workers from re-entering a sprayed area for 48 hours.

The P.E.I. study detected chlorothalonil in a box suspended over the ocean, 30 metres from the shore in Abrams Village. Researchers had placed the monitor on the wharf to try to capture pristine samples of air unaffected by local agriculture.

Labchuk said sales records show more pesticide is used per person in P.E.I. than any place else in Canada or the United States. Local farmers spray a whopping 18 pounds (8 kilograms) of pesticide per person each year, she said, compared to an average of just three pounds per person across Canada, or six pounds per person in California.

“The federal government should step in and review its policy on the use of these products,” Labchuk said.

“It may be different when they are being sprayed far from people, in the middle of nowhere, but in P.E.I., they are being sprayed five feet (1.5 metres) from a sandbox where children play, 10 feet (three metres) away from the open kitchen window of a private home.”

Environment Canada officials could not be reached last night for comment.