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national news

Agent Orange controversy in N.B. sparks wider concerns about toxic sprays

at 13:53 on July 9, 2005, EST.
By CHRIS MORRIS

FREDERICTON (CP) - While the Canadian military is downplaying the impact of Agent Orange tests at a New Brunswick base 40 years ago, the implications are widening for a whole generation of people who grew up prior to the age of environmental awareness.

Soil, water and vegetation tests will be conducted at Canadian Forces Base Gagetown this summer to determine if there are lingering effects from the use of toxic herbicides, including Agent Orange, during the 1950s and 60s.

Brig.-Gen. Ray Romses, commander of Atlantic land forces for the past two years, says he is confident the tests will prove there is no reason for concern.

"We believe that we will find that everything is quite satisfactory, but it is important to do the tests to ensure that we can give that reassurance," says Romses, who is leaving his post to take up military liaison duties in the United Kingdom.

Revisiting the Agent Orange controversy, which first came to light in the 1980s, has meant revisiting an era when Canadians could literally pick their poison from a host of pesticides, herbicides and defoliants now considered dangerous.

While people who worked on and lived near Gagetown worry about the potential health impact of dioxin - the toxic ingredient in Agent Orange - many Canadians who grew up in the 50s, 60s and 70s may now be wondering about their exposure to DDT, PCBs chlorobenzenes and the other widely used chemical concoctions.

All of these products were legal at the time, begging the question: what debt, if any, does the Canadian government owe for allowing these chemicals to be used in the first place?

"It's a terrible thing to acknowledge that we poisoned a generation of people," says Morag Carter, spokeswoman for the Suzuki Foundation, a Vancouver-based environmental organization.

"But if we don't learn from that and encourage people to tell their stories and demand answers . . . there is no way we'll be able to address these issues in the long term."

Carter notes that Canada was the first country to sign the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants in 2001. The convention lists 12 chemicals, including dioxin, to be eliminated from use.

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She says signing the agreement was an acknowledgement by Canada that it recognizes the health risks from dioxin and the costs to the environment.

"The problem with our national efforts around things like toxic chemicals is that we're great at saying stuff and we are absolutely terrible at implementation."

Carter believes other communities and groups of people will come forward in the future, perhaps as a result of Gagetown, to demand answers about pollutants in their neighbourhoods.

For example, she says, commercial varieties of Agent Orange were applied across Canada in the 1950s and 60s. The dioxin-laced ingredient in these defoliant mixtures - 2,4,5,t - wasn't banned in Canada until 1985.

In New Brunswick, the provincial government and its Crown-owned power utility, NB Power, applied commercial versions of Agent Orange on forests and along power lines.

In the 1980s, an NB Power memo was uncovered by former utility workers that confirmed the spraying of the commercial version of Agent Orange along power lines.

Those who did the spraying believed their health was permanently harmed by the exposure and they demanded, and eventually received, government compensation.

The 1961 memo also revealed that several people in the village of Hoyt, N.B., not far from Fredericton, became ill after eating raspberries doused with dioxin-contaminated herbicide. The raspberries were picked near a power line.

One elderly woman said her vision was damaged, but she did not seek compensation.

Wayne Dwernychuk, an environmental consultant who spent several years testing dioxin levels in the countryside of Vietnam, says people exposed to forestry and power company sprays have cause to be worried.

"Yes, there may be some concern in that area depending on how close these power lines were to villages and communities," he says.

While there is no question about the toxicity of dioxin, the health impacts remain tenuous and difficult to prove.

Medical experts do not acknowledge a definite link between dioxins and illnesses like cancer and diabetes, but they do say there are some associations.

"It is a very shadowy science right now in terms of the impacts of dioxin," says Dwernychuk. "That's why there is such a public reaction, you never really know what the impact is going to be from a medical perspective."

Ironically, one of the consequences of the Agent Orange controversy at CFB Gagetown was the recent decision by the Maine National Guard not to train at the New Brunswick base until it gets a clean bill of health.

Agent Orange and other defoliants were tested at the base by the U.S. military in 1966 and 67.

Romses says he understands the national guard's concerns given Vietnam and the on-going fallout over Agent Orange exposure.

But he says the two situations cannot be compared.

"The spraying in Vietnam was widespread and in heavy concentrations," he says.

"That's not what occurred here in Gagetown where we are talking about two very short test periods on very small pieces of ground."

Romses says the national guard will be given environmental test results from Gagetown as soon as they are ready.u

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