**CORRECTION: MAD COW DISEASE**

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March 23, 1999, the Los Angeles Unified School District adopted a path-breaking new policy on pesticides in schools. The City of Los Angeles operates the largest public school system in the country. The policy says, in part:

"It is the policy of the Los Angeles Unified School District (District) to practice Integrated Pest Management (IPM). . . ."  

"Pesticides pose risks to human health and the environment, with special risks to children. It is recognized that pesticides cause adverse health effects in humans such as cancer, neurologic disruption, birth defects, genetic alteration, reproductive harm, immune system dysfunction, endocrine disruption, and acute poisoning. Pests will be controlled to protect the health and safety of students and staff, maintain a productive learning environment, and maintain the integrity of school buildings and grounds. Pesticides will not be used to control pests for aesthetic reasons alone. The safety and health of students, staff and the environment will be paramount.

"Further, it is the goal of the District to provide for the safest and lowest risk approach to control pest problems while protecting people, the environment, and property. The District's IPM [Integrated Pest Management] Policy incorporates focusing on long-term prevention and will give non-chemical methods first consideration when selecting appropriate pest control techniques. The District will strive to ultimately eliminate the use of all chemical controls.

"The Precautionary Principle is the long-term objective of the District. The principle recognizes that:

"1. No pesticide product is free from risk or threat to human health, and

"2. Industrial producers should be required to prove that their pesticide products demonstrate an absence of the risks enumerated in paragraph two (2) rather than requiring that the government or the public prove that human health is being harmed.

"This policy recognizes that full implementation of the Precautionary Principle is not possible at this time and may not be for decades. But the District commits itself to full implementation as soon as verifiable scientific data enabling this becomes available."

To us, what seems most important about this policy is that it commits the Los Angeles school district to selecting the least harmful way to manage pests. Where two pest control techniques are available, the least harmful will be selected. This is a simple, but powerful way to make decisions about technologies that can degrade human health and the environment.

Our hat is off to Californians for Pesticide Reform (CPR) -- a coalition of over 130 organizations working to reduce the damage from pesticides in California. For further information about CPR and its other work, contact them at 49 Powell Street, Suite 530, San Francisco, CA 94102; tel. (415) 981-3939; or E-mail: pests@igc.org, or see www.igc.org/cpr.

For example, see their June, 1999, report FIELDS OF POISON, which documents the shocking failure of California health authorities to control the poisoning of farm workers by pesticides. CPR published this study with the Pesticide Action Network North America (PANNA), the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO, and the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation. The report (in English and Spanish) is available on the web at http://www.panna.org/panna/resources/documents/fieldsAvail.dvt.html.

We reported incorrectly last week (REHW #683) that Montana health officials buried in a landfill the carcasses of 80 elk that had been slaughtered because they were suspected of carrying a form of "mad cow disease." In actual fact, before the landfill plan could be carried out, local opposition swelled and in early January, a portable incinerator was brought in from North Dakota and the 80 elk carcasses were incinerated at a cost of $50,000 which was provided by an Emergency Environmental Fund in the governor's budget. The ashes were buried on the farm where the elk had been raised.

The elk had been slaughtered by state officials because they were suspected of harboring chronic wasting disease (CWD), a form of "mad cow disease" that strikes elk and deer. There is no test for CWD in living elk, so Montana officials -- who had found symptoms of the disease in one of the 80 elk last fall -- took action consistent with the precautionary principle. Subsequent tests revealed symptoms of CWD in three of the 80 animals, so the entire herd was, in fact, at risk of spreading the disease to elk in the wild, if any of them escaped from captivity. These were the first confirmed cases of CWD among elk in Montana.[1] CWD has not been found in wild elk in Montana though it is present in wild deer and elk in parts of Colorado and Wyoming.

The Attorney General of Montana, Joe Mazurek, called for a precautionary halt in the licensing of new game farms in Montana, and a ban on importing elk and deer into the state, to protect two of Montana's local industries, cattle ranching and hunting.[2] The State of Massachusetts has reportedly banned elk farming because confinement creates conditions conducive to transmission of CWD, with the potential for spreading the disease into the wild if a confined animal escapes. Again, this is an expression of the precautionary principle in action. So far as we know, no other state has banned elk farming.

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The U.S. Food and Drug Administration and Canadian health authorities in August advised blood centers to refuse blood donations from people who had spent six or more cumulative months in England between Jan. 1, 1980 and Dec. 31, 1996, on the assumption that everyone who spent substantial time in England during that period is potentially infected with the human form of mad cow disease and that it can be transmitted through blood.[3] This, too, was a precautionary action because no evidence exists that the human form of mad cow disease has ever been transmitted through a blood transfusion. However, as the JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN VETERINARY MEDICAL ASSOCIATION reported, "current studies cannot exclude this possibility."

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A recent report in SCIENCE magazine argues that the transmission of infectious diseases from wildlife to humans has reached epidemic proportions worldwide during the past two decades, and that the problem is being exacerbated greatly by "globalization" of the economy.

** HIV-1, the virus that gives rise to AIDS, is now believed to have originated in one or more species of chimpanzee.[5,6] Chimpanzee meat is considered a delicacy in parts of Africa to such an extent that the extinction of all wild chimpanzee populations is now a real possibility.[6] Chimps are killed to supply the dinner tables of logging camps where forests are being cut down to provide lumber for export to the wealthy nations of the world. It is not known when the HIV-1 virus made the leap from chimps to humans, but AIDS was first reported in humans in 1983. Worldwide, about 35 million humans have now been infected with the HIV-1 virus.[6]

** An influenza virus that originated in chickens killed at least four humans in Hong Kong in 1997.[7] After this avian flu virus made the leap to humans, it did not propagate efficiently from human to human, but this was just a matter of luck. Pigs and some primates
can also carry influenza viruses that can make the leap to humans with deadly effect.

** The emergence of Lyme disease in the northeastern U.S. resulted from changes in the habitat of deer carrying the deer tick, which then transmitted the disease to humans.[4]

** Global warming has extended the range of mosquitoes carrying malaria and dengue fever in South America, Central America and Asia. In the early 1990s, dengue fever (known as "breakbone fever" because it is so painful) made its appearance in Texas along the border with Mexico.[4]

The transmission of infectious diseases from wildlife to humans is being greatly enhanced by international shipments of food and fiber, domesticated animals, and timber. This is one of the huge uncounted costs of "globalizing" our economies. Biological contaminated wastes, such as landfill leachate and runoff, and ballast water from ships, contribute to the problem as well.

The globalized economy is introducing alien species to many parts of the world at an unprecedented rate. The introduction of alien species is putting evolutionary processes on "fast forward." For example, in the past, new insects appeared in the Hawaiian Islands at the rate of one every 50,000 years. In recent decades, new species of insects have appeared in the Islands at the rate of 15 to 20 per year.[8] Stanford biologist Peter Vitousek estimates that the introduction of alien species is now the second-largest cause of species extinction, after habitat loss.[8] Vitousek and some of his colleagues view the shuffling of the world's species as a global change as important as global warming but easier to control because it could be done without disrupting modern lifestyles (or provoking the wrath of the oil giants).

Vitousek argues that humans can take thoughtful action to minimize the damage caused by introduced species. For example, citizens can be warned by governments that a new species of plant or animal has appeared and citizens could then mobilize to locate and remove the invading species. We are not powerless in the face of modern trends, but we must first recognize that concerted action is necessary and possible. We believe thoughtful action might include taking steps to slow the rate at which the world's economies are being "globalized." Selecting leaders who have not embraced the cult of "free trade" would be an important step we could take.

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)


