E.V. John
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CLINICAL POLLUTION :

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FRANK DOUGH:

Tomorrow is World Environment Day and here in London 500 experts will be gathering to discuss pollution control. And that's a subject very dear to the hearts of seven Welsh hill farmers whose land is, they claim, heavily polluted by PCB. Now those initials stand for poly-chlorinated biphenals, a group of chemicals used for over 30 years, but which scientists have only recently discovered can build up to highly poisonous levels in human and animal fats. And after the mysterious death of 12,000 sea birds three years ago PCB was found concentrated in the livers of most of the birds. And in Japan PCB has caused widespread vomiting, hair loss, asthma and the death of 2?? people.

Well, tonight in the light of yesterday's Doomwatch story in the Sunday Times we ask, can it happen here? Just how great is the danger of toxic waste like PCB getting into our water supply? Well, Patrick Hannan has been investigating the threat to the Welsh hill farmers.

PATRICK HANNAN:

The row that's blown up here is over a disused quarry near Pontypridd that's been filled with chemical waste from a Newport factory 20 miles away. Seven farms are affected by waste seeping from under the tip and there experts say there are at least 30 different chemicals there. Eight of them, including PCB, which they're most worried about, they say are definitely toxic. Some of the chemicals are apparently flowing under the road into another disused quarry and they're also being carried by streams across neighbouring farmland. Bill Maidment has been told by his advisors he should use only a third of his farm and he believes that some of his cattle have been killed by PCB. But the official answer from the Welsh Office says there's no danger to health. And the Secretary of State, who has met his experts again today, said that no public water supplies are affected.

REPORTER:

Well, there have been so many reports of cyanide dumping in the Midlands during the last 18 months that, believe me, it's difficult to know where to begin. In fact one conference on the subject was told that this seems to be the dumping ground for poisonous waste manufacturers from all over Britain. Now just to remember a couple of cases.....36 barrels of poisonous cyanide sludge were found on a tip near Nuneaton. An important discovery because

this eventually led to stiffer penalties being introduced, you may remember, last year for this illegal dumping. There were worries about the drinking water at Rugby because of cyanide, and again special tests had to be carried out and fortunately it was clear. But even today it's still in the news because at West Bromwich the people have had to be reassured today that the cyanide found in a local brook was only a small quantity and is not a danger to health. But it shows the need for constant vigilance.

2ND REPORTER:

Well, our pollution blackspot is called Melkins Bank, a 60 acre site at Congleton in Cheshire. It was used as a regular dumping ground until 5 years ago when the dumping was stopped by the High Court. Now they're planning to turn the blackspot into a beauty spot, an 18 hole golf course to be exact. But the idea has already been criticised as sheer lunacy by a local industrial chemist, Dr. Frank Holland. He claims that the County Council's action in simply bulldozing the land flat is asking for trouble. Over the years some 50,000 drums have been dumped, many contain cyanide and explosive sodium compounds. And directly beneath the dump is a water culvert flowing straight into the River Wheelock. The Council say it's too costly to remove the chemicals and although they've had a Harwell scientist checking the operation throughout they admit it will be impossible to analyse all of the drums. All of which, claims Dr. Holland, adds up to a certain recipe for an environmental time bomb.

3RD REPORTER:

And in Basingstoke about a hundred tons of cyanide waste are buried within yards of the main water supply. To avoid disturbing the soil the County Council has had to divert a road and Government scientists have warned against development of any kind. It's hoped to find an alternative water supply later this year but meanwhile the cyanide stays put. The big fear is of course by that time the rotting drums could release a major discharge into the boreholes from which 60,000 unsuspecting people make their morning cup of tea.

F.D:

Now all those stories, John Barry, seem to spell out a risk to the public, but just how great is that risk?

JOHN DARBY: ('Insight')

It's impossible to quantify because nobody knows over this country what has been dumped because for the last 15, 20 years we have not had, until last year, any kind of legislation whatever to stop people dumping pretty well what they like where they like. And on top of the mess that the legislation governing legal tips was in where councils were quite unable to tell one when one asked them. And I know because two years ago we tried to find out because we checked forty tips around the country, rather under that, about 35 tips, to see if they were licensed to dump wet, that is liquid poisonous waste, and the councils didn't know, they had absolutely no idea.

F.B:

They had no record at all where these dumps were?

J.D:

Not only did they have no record of what had been dumped on these tips, they didn't even know whether it would have been legal to dump the stuff which we could tell them was there.

F.B:

So clearly if they haven't a record of where they are they don't know what has been dumped on them.

J.D:

No. The tipping of stuff on unregulated tips is called fly-tipping and what you do, if you're an unscrupulous tipping company, is to give your driver two quid and say, there you are Charlie, go away and find somewhere to dump it. And Charlie goes and spends the money on beer and in many cases either dumps the stuff in ditches or puts the stuff down the domestic sewer supply, which happened in Coventry.

Now one has heard a lot about cyanide, it's worth pointing out that the most famous, indeed I think the earliest case of cyanide being known to be dumped in Birmingham came to light because one of the men actually involved in the tipping operation suddenly realised that he was dumping cyanide beside one of the Birmingham Corporation water holes and he lived in Birmingham. And he suddenly thought, this is not a very good idea, and so he decided to tell somebody about it.

F.B:

That was a private individual just acting on his own initiative.

J.D:

Well, a driver involved, an accomplice in this.

F.B:

But I thought after that case that there were some guidelines laid down. I mean who do you say is responsible for the dumping of chemicals? I mean is it the chemical firm? Is it the sub-contractor dumper? Is it the local authority, who may or may not know where it is? Or is it the Government?

J.B:

Well, over the last year in theory it has been the responsibility of the first two under the Poisonous Waste Disposal Act, which came in principally because of the scare about cyanide. But it doesn't work at the moment, partly because there are various loopholes in it which can be got round and are being got round, but also simply because the people who are meant to regulate this, the local authorities, have neither the manpower nor the experience, the expertise, to work out and just keep up with the flow of licences and applications for licences that come in. And if a chemical company wants to dump a mixture of nine compounds - and let's not run away with the idea that only cyanide is poisonous, a lot of things are very, very poisonous indeed, cyanide merely happens to be dramatic but there are a lot of other chemicals with quite unpronounceable names which will kill you quite as easily - and they say, we're going to dump sludge, they know perfectly well that some hard pressed local authority hasn't got the expertise to say, well, what exactly is in it, let's go and analyse it. So they sign a form, okay, sludge, and away you go.

F.B:

Well, let's go to Douglas Gowan and back to Wales. Now you were brought in by those hill farmers to analyse soil and water and you've come back from America having had examples analysed there. Now why was it necessary for you to go to the States to have it done?

DOUGLAS GOWAN: (Planning & Waste Consultant)

Well, we've been analysing the waste at Minodee (phonetic) for 2 years now and our results have been subject to a great deal of criticism. And we went to the United States because their knowledge and indeed their methodology on analytical techniques seem greater than our own and we wanted confirming evidence of the results we've been finding.

F.B:

But you're not saying that this couldn't have been done by a Government

department say here?

D.G:

Yes, I am. I think the techniques used by the Government departments here are open to question.

F.D:

But the Ministry of the Environment, I mean their own surveys....they'd probably question your figures wouldn't they?

D.G:

The Department of the Environment have not questioned our figures, our figures are being questioned by the Welsh Office at some length.

F.D:

Yes, who today have reassured people in Wales saying that no public water supplies are affected by this PCB.

D.G:

Yes, this is perfectly true. I think no public water supplies are affected in the sense that no town supplies are affected. Private water supplies are certainly affected. As far as the farmers are concerned their own private water supplies are affected and the water supplies for the cattle are affected. PCB can be passed on into the food chain through milk and as long as stock have access to the contaminated areas where there's undesirable levels of PCB, which the Department of the Environment themselves have agreed is now so.

F.D:

Yes. What as far as you're concerned is the next step in Wales for these hill farmers?

D.G:

Oh remedy, no question or doubt about this. The pollution can be stopped, it's expensive but it is practically possible and can be stopped quickly.

F.D:

Yes. Well, the thing is it's going to be massively expensive isn't it? Now who is going to foot that bill, I mean if this valley has to be - your article says great sheets of steel will actually have to shut the....

D.G:

It's up to the community and the Government to decide. If we decide that the cost of pollution and the cost of industrial effluent is to be born by the community then it will be born by the ratepayers and the manufacturers will be enabled to presumably send stuff out to the local authority for treating.

Or if we decide it should be borne by the consumers of a given product then the prices are likely to go up. It's up to the community and the Government to decide. But at the moment we're in limbo and the present Act doesn't work and a new act is needed.

F.ll:

I mean you would seem to be saying I would like the manufacturers, the actual chemical manufacturers to have to take responsibility for the safe disposal of their effluent.

J.ll:

Yes, I think that's the most equitable solution but there are problems. For instance, if we are in competition with a lot of other countries throughout the world and their manufacturers are able to produce goods cheaper because they don't have to pay for the cost of pollution involved perhaps we'll lose markets. Again perhaps that's a cost which we'll have to bear.

F.ll:

John Barry, Douglas Gowan, thank you very much. Clearly a subject we will be hearing more of.

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