

Shame on Our Government Leadership

Human rights abuses abound

Respect for human life must be the foundation on which toxics policy is based. It is a tenet that should pervade government and corporate policy. This issue seems particularly poignant right now as public attention is focused on the war in Iraq, the loss of life on both sides, and questions of human rights abuses.

Shameful acts, fundamental flaws in government policy

It is hard to pick up a newspaper or turn on the TV and not feel a sense of overwhelming shame regarding U.S. policies and operations that are so callously abusive of human rights and disrespectful of human life. Starting with the overall effect of our government policy in the Iraq war, the public is not given full information on the impact of the war on human life. General Tommy Franks, U.S. Central Command, has said, "We don't do body counts." PBS aired a piece on April 26 on civilian casualties, interviewing a researcher from iraqbodycount.org which puts the number at over 10,000 at this writing. **Full honest information is a basic tenet.**

We've all seen the pictures and read about U.S. treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghurayb prison in Iraq, actions that the United Nations is considering classifying as war crimes. Now, we learn about the treatment of Portland, Oregon-area attorney Brandon Mayfield, who was jailed for two weeks, with false evidence, sloppy lab work, and overzealous FBI agents who, contrary to the analysis of their Spanish counterparts, linked his fingerprints on a plastic bag to the March 11 Madrid bombing. *The New York Times* reported on June 5 that FBI officials told a congressional briefing that they were working off the equivalent of a "second generation" digital print, never asking to see the original prints or a higher quality image until well after the arrest. After abuse and disruption to his life and work, Mr. Mayfield received a formal apology from the FBI, according to the Times. **Good science is a basic tenet necessary to prevent abuse.**

Then, the recently released Enron tapes again remind us of how the insensitivity to human life invaded the corporate culture of that company. Employees bragged about stealing \$2 million a day from California during the 2000–01 energy crisis by manipulating California's energy market. **Respect for others' lives is a basic tenet.**

Frogs and the future

Professor Tyrone Hayes at the 22nd National Pesticide Forum at the University of California at Berkeley in April (see page 10 in this issue) talked about his research methodology and findings in which the herbicide atrazine, found in rain and river water, makes frogs hermaphroditic and causes cancer. At levels as low as 0.1 parts per billion, exposed frogs became demasculinized (lose of androgen) and feminized (creating of the female hor-

mone estrogen, or estrodial. The manufacturer responded by characterizing the findings as normal background levels, then stopped funding Dr. Hayes' research. While these new findings confirm earlier ones, atrazine's 75–100 million pounds of usage annually continues to make it the number one pesticide used in the U.S. by volume... as EPA deliberates. As Dr. Hayes says, "We are finding much of the same types of effects in amphibians that you would find in humans – retarded growth, retarded development and gonadal and immune system problems." **Where is the interest in full information?**

A recent study, reported in this issue of PAY, finds that synthetic pyrethroids, used increasingly nationwide, have accumulated in many creek sediments to levels that are toxic to freshwater bottom dwellers. **Why do we not have full information before chemicals are so widely dispersed in the environment?**

Stopping involuntary exposure

In this context of limited information and poor science supporting widespread use of toxic chemicals, the issue of involuntary exposure to these toxic materials is taking on renewed and increased public attention. *Do we have a right to protect ourselves from pesticides invading our lives, our property, our bodies?* This issue of PAY includes an article, *Getting the Drift on Chemical Trespass*, which discusses the issue, identifies methods for detecting pesticide drift, or trespass, and strategies for seeking redress. This exposure increasingly is being defined as secondhand exposure because of the similarity to secondhand cigarette smoke. And, as pointed out in the article, it is both an issue of exposure in the outdoor and indoor environment.

If toxics policy is to respect human life, then it needs to start adopting meaningful restrictions that stop drift, or stop the use of the chemicals that drift. And, if the federal government does not want to address this basic need, then states and localities must exert authority to protect public health. If states do not want to act, then localities must re-exert their right to protect the health and welfare of their residents.

Dr. Hayes reached a conclusion in his work that we all need to embrace. He told us at the Forum, "I used to think that there

was a connection between environmental health and public health. I no longer think that. They are one and the same."

My sense of shame in our government's failure to protect human rights in war and toxics policy renews my spirit to work for fundamental change.

—Jay Feldman is executive director of Beyond Pesticides.

