

From Sacred Cows to Mad Cows

It was inevitable that mad cow disease would hit conventional U.S. beef stock. What continues to amaze me is how little we know about big problems. Mad cow exemplifies this. In fact, as a matter of policy and practice, we allow and reward management approaches that put investment return before health protection. We do not answer basic safety threshold questions before allowing practices to proliferate. These practices become the norm or the convention, then widely institutionalized. Vested economic interests evolve, policies are promulgated, bureaucracies are established, interest groups are formed and sacred cows are born.

Corporate greed and systemic bias

On the one hand we could say that corporate greed has propelled the mad cow problem forward, that sloppy practices have given way to bad results that threaten public health. Issue a slap on the wrist to the corporations or farmers responsible and impose a few new guidelines. However, the simplicity of this analysis belies the complexities of the situation. Do organophosphate pesticides, as farmer Mark Purdy (see *PAY, Summer 2003*) suggests, also play a role in bringing on or increasing vulnerability to the disease. Could several interactions that come into play? Why don't we know more about practices that are so widespread? And, if we don't know more, given our poor track record in these situations, why don't we just stop!

The term sacred cow has come to mean any stubborn loyalty to a long-standing institution that impedes progress.

The agrichemical industry (CropLife America, aka the American Crop Protection Association, aka the National Agricultural Chemicals Association, *in lieu of* Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment/RISE) is one such sacred cow in the halls of Congress, the White House, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Environmental Protection Agency. The industry's views drive the process and are given elevated respect, despite the harm that they have had and continue to cause the nation. The industry's products, programs and policies, and its promotion of the widespread use of synthetic chemicals in our food, homes, land, air, water, workplace, schools and parks are literally killing us. They are impeding progress. Industry views and products are increasingly out of step with science, self-serving, and focused on downplaying risk factors by arguing for unrealistically low exposure assumptions, or by advocating no restrictive action, claiming there is not enough data.

Scientific red flags for change

This issue of *Pesticides and You* identifies, as do most issues, new scientific studies that serve as another warning shot, again affirming that much of what we did not know is hurting us. In this issue, you'll read about scientific peer-reviewed studies, including: (i) a study that finds pesticides cause asthma with childhood asthma rates nearly five times higher in household

that use herbicides; (ii) two studies that independently find elevated rates of Lou Gehrig's Disease in 1991 Gulf War veterans exposed to nerve agents in the organophosphate pesticide family; and (iii) a new study that finds a toxic soup in our homes, 26 different chemicals in the dust and 19 in the air of tested homes, confirming other previous studies. Some of the chemicals that are found in homes are not actually used there, raising the question of our ability to control where these chemicals end up when they are used. These findings reinforce the notion that pesticide use, with its identifiable hazards and unknown effects, is a violation of human rights – the right to pursue life without our very existence being involuntarily threatened by poisons.

The sacred agrichemical industry cow is now the mad cow, creating more urgency for change. *Precautionary Principle* policy, adopted at all levels of government, is needed. Chemicals should not be used unless they are proven safe. We should not have unanswered health and safety questions, such as those raised in this issue's article, *Synergy: The Big Unknowns of Pesticide Exposure*. This approach makes sense in a period when our food supply is threatened because of mad cow disease and policies that allow big unknowns to threaten our health. As a matter of policy, we can deem the unknowns unacceptable, especially in light of the availability of alternative approaches and products.

Embrace alternatives, stop the poisons

We need to embrace the alternatives and give voice and support to those who are implementing alternatives. This issue features a piece by Hendrikus Schaven, founder of Hendrikus Organics, *Getting the Dirt on Good Soil*, in which he describes the importance of soil health as the foundation for pest prevention.

Finally, since this is all about protecting health and the environment, *Beyond Pesticides* in December, 2003 helped give voice to a mother and nurse from Florida, who, along with her children, was poisoned from lawn care chemicals and used the holiday season and new year to issue a public wish for an end to the poisoning and the use of lawn pesticides. We join her with this wish

for the new year, which appears on the *Beyond Pesticides* website, www.beyondpesticides.org, and is available in hard copy.

We press on and thank all those who so generously contributed financial support to the *Beyond Pesticides* program in 2003!



—Jay Feldman is executive director of *Beyond Pesticides*.