

UNPOISON

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Press Release: UnPoison Publishes South Africa's List of Highly Hazardous Pesticides and Calls on South African Government to Take Urgent Action

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[UnPoison](#), a South African non-profit organization and civil society network working to protect public health from the harms of highly hazardous pesticides commonly used in South Africa while promoting the development of a biological solutions sector for agriculture, has just published the first publicly available [list of Highly Hazardous Pesticides](#). Information like this is not freely available to the public because the national database of registered agrochemicals is housed and maintained privately by the pesticide industry. There is a lot for South Africans to be concerned about!

Highly Hazardous Pesticides (HHPs) are pesticides that have been identified as posing a high and unacceptable risk to human health or the environment. They are typically characterized by their acute toxicity, their potential to cause chronic health effects, or their persistence in the environment and are commonly highly restricted or banned in other regions for this reason.

Unpoison's list, developed and categorised in accordance with the 8 criteria developed by the [FAO/WHO Joint Meeting on Pesticide Management](#) (a UN advisory body on the lifecycle management of pesticides in agriculture and public health) shows that there are 192 Highly Hazardous Pesticides registered and legally in use - only 16 of which have partial bans or restrictions. Of these over a third (57/192) are banned in the EU (because of unacceptable human health and environmental risks), and 36 of which belong to the most hazardous class, a class known as WHO Group 1a and 1b which are substances known to have carcinogenic potential for humans, based on human health evidence, and in acute poisonings can cause death. .

Examples of highly hazardous pesticides in this class still legally registered and used in South Africa include:

- **Carbofuran** - is a pesticide used on many crops and is toxic by inhalation, or dermal absorption. Farmers and farmworkers are most at risk as it is an endocrine disrupting

chemical (EDC) and reproductive and developmental toxicant. It is also highly toxic to aquatic organisms.

- **Mevinphos** - exposure can result in long term neurological effects, it is also a ground water contaminant and farmworkers and farmers are at great exposure risk as it is also an endocrine disrupting chemical (EDC).
- **Terbufos** - is an agricultural insecticide with neurotoxic effects that is often sold as a street pesticide in South Africa, (a pesticide that is decanted and sold for use in informal markets without the correct label or warnings). Children and adolescents are the most vulnerable group and high incidences of poisonings are recorded every year.

As early as 2008 the WHO and FAO recommended that this class of highly hazardous chemicals be eliminated from use world wide, yet fifteen years later, South Africa is still legally using these chemicals on our food and in our environment.

In April 2022, UnPoison welcomed [a notice by The Registrar](#) of Act 36 of 1947, who regulates the use and registration of agrochemicals in South Africa, stating his intention to phase out a group of chemicals by June 2024. The notice said that “an assessment of active ingredients and the formulations has been carried out of CMR (carcinogenic, mutagenic, and reproductive toxicity categories 1a and 1b of GHS has been carried out at an international level,” he went on to say that “the assessment identified the need to reduce risks to human health associated with such products.” Although the intention stated is a move in the right direction, UnPoison found this notice highly problematic as firstly, the group of pesticides the registrar is looking at is not the most dangerous group of chemicals, ie. those that fall into WHO 1a and 1b. Moreso, the notice was vague and did not include the list of chemicals, nor the methodology used for identifying them, nor a detailed plan with a timeframe to phase the chemicals out.

Subsequently, when the initial list of highly hazardous chemicals proposed for banning was finally circulated by the Registrar, UnPoison found it worryingly deficient as it is a very different group of chemicals to 36 highly hazardous pesticides that fall into 36 WHO group 1a and 1b registered and still legally in use in South Africa. The chemicals on the Registrar’s list belong to an entirely different classification, *CMR 1a and 1b of GHS*. Of the 29 chemicals on the Registrar’s list, only 4 actually fall into criteria 1 WHO group 1a & 1b, which means that 32 of the 36 WHO 1a and 1b highly hazardous pesticides are not included in his proposed ban list. Why?

South Africans should be questioning why the Registrar is not meeting an international benchmark to safeguard public health and joining the commitment by countries around the world, to ban the most hazardous group of acutely toxic highly hazardous pesticides in use in South Africa (as recommended by the UN FAO and WHO), and why lessor chemicals that are not as severely toxic are on his ban list? Why is it acceptable to prolong the exposure of South Africans working with, and those in the vicinity of the spraying of, this most deadly group of highly hazardous pesticides? South Africans should also be questioning the methodology used to determine his list, and who was involved in that process. The answers will likely be revealing, as the list is certainly deficient in achieving his intention to “to reduce risks to human health”.

This topic is especially relevant in light of the candid media briefing last Friday 12 August to the South African government by the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights and Toxics, Marcos Orellana who brought [urgent issues to light](#), after meeting extensively with members of the UnPoison Network and others.

“During my visit to the Western Cape province, I heard from women farm workers who were routinely exposed to hazardous pesticides and who denounced serious adverse health impacts in their communities,” said Orellana, “ I also learned that pesticides meant for agricultural use are illegally sold and used to combat rampant rat and cockroach pest infestations that spread in the absence of sanitation services in informal settlements. I was appalled to learn of the many children who were poisoned or died from eating, drinking or handling hazardous pesticides.”

“Despite the scientific evidence on their harms and the fact that they cannot be safely used, many highly hazardous pesticides are still legal and in use in South Africa,”..... “Accordingly, South Africa should ban the import of all highly hazardous pesticides, including those that have been banned for use in their country of origin, without delay.”

Additional Highly Hazardous Pesticides used widely in South Africa from other hazard categories that have many groups concerned include:

- **Paraquat:** Mentioned by the Special Rapporteur in his media briefing, is a herbicide used to control weeds, it is highly toxic to humans and can cause death even with limited exposures. There are a number of organizations that are calling for a ban on the use of paraquat, including [Women on Farms Project](#) whose members as women farm-workers are frequently exposed and many poisonings have resulted.
- **Atrazine:** An herbicide used to control weeds in crops. It has contaminated most water sources in South Africa, is a suspected carcinogen and can also cause reproductive problems.
- **2,4D** which the [African Centre For Biodiversity](#) has long been campaigning against is used to grow GMO corn which makes up more than 80% of South Africa’s maize. According to their 2017 report “it is a war chemical that has long been linked to wide-ranging serious illnesses including cancers, birth defects, reproductive toxicity and disruption of endocrine systems.”

The issue of Highly Hazardous pesticides was just one of the many “toxics and human rights” issues that members of UnPoison brought before the Special Rapporteur in a full day of consultation, and the network welcomed the inclusion of these issues in his preliminary report which included:

- South Africa’s weak, outdated, and fragmented legal framework, specifically the Fertilizers, Farm Feeds, Agricultural Remedies and Stock Remedies Act 36 of 1947, an apartheid era law. The 2010 Pesticide Management Policy has not been implemented and would go a long way to address the issues that cause harm to countless South Africans, contaminate our scarce water sources and fragile environment.
- Double Standards for EU Export - chemicals manufactured by countries in the EU but banned for use on their own soil and food, yet exported to South Africa and permitted on our local produce.
- There is no publicly available database of registered chemicals in South Africa. The national registry is housed privately by Agri-intel, a subsidiary of Croplife, and can only be accessed on approval, for a fee, and by members who have to pay a percentage of their annual turnover in fees. Unpoison calls on DALRRD to make the database and un-sensitive details of the chemical registrations publicly accessible.
- Pesticide poisonings which are grossly under-reported due to fear of job loss or loss of income by farm-workers as well as an inadequate reporting process for poisonings or

knowledge thereof by health practitioners and the general public. Woman on Farms released a chilling video sharing the stories of victims which you can [watch here](#).

- Pesticide spraying on farms and how this is regulated, including spray drift into surrounding areas and non-target zones.
- A hindered and unnecessary process for the registration of biological solutions which has scuppered the sector from growing.
- Lack of support for alternative farming and pest control methods by DALRRD. The department has no expertise to support farmers wanting to farm with alternative methods and has not implemented many excellent agro ecology policies in its department that have been gathering dust for more than 10 years. These include the draft Agroecology Strategy and the Organic Policy.

There is a growing body of scientific evidence that suggests that we have crossed a tipping point for chemical contamination of Earth's natural systems. This means that the levels of chemicals in the environment have reached a point where they are causing irreversible damage to ecosystems and human health.

The UnPoison network made up of nearly 60 organisations and experts including academic institutions, NGOs, lawyers, doctors, toxicologists, scientists, farmers, farmworkers associations, industry bodies, agronomists, activists, and community representatives from affected farm town residents, call on the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural development to urgently address the issues being raised. The network has extended and continues to extend offers of support to work with the South African government and other stakeholders to help develop an alternative food system, phase out the use of toxic chemicals starting with Highly Hazardous Pesticides, and to promote the emergence of a new local biological solutions manufacturing sector that could radically boost the agricultural sector's economy and ensure its resilience in the face of climate change and unsustainable, imported fossil fuel based chemicals, with their associated rising costs and risks.

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[UnPoison](#) is an NPO that does advocacy, research, and public awareness, as well as coordinate a national multi-sector network of academic institutions, NGOs, and experts including lawyers, doctors, toxicologists, scientists, farmers, farmworkers and their associations, agronomists, activists, and affected farm town residents.

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