

June 14, 2007

**The Import Risk Analysis Panel
Biosecurity Australia
Department of Agriculture Fisheries & Forestry – Australia**

Warm Greetings from Davao City!

We write to inform you of how the banana industry has adversely affected the lives of the people residing within and around banana plantations in the city.

We commend you for opening up the discussions on the revised draft import risk analysis report. Being one of the stakeholders, we would like to share with you our side – our personal experiences. We also hope that this could give you insight into what other aspects need to be evaluated with regards to the operation of Cavendish banana plantations in the Philippines.

Chemical intrusion due to aerial spraying

Several concerned organizations here have formed a multi-sectoral coalition that continuously calls for the banning of aerial spraying of pesticides within Davao City.

We got involved in the campaign to ban aerial spraying due to consistent appeal of the affected residents to help them stop the practice of aerial spraying because they themselves are often sprayed with the chemicals intended only for pests. They are not pests!

It is unfair that they suffer the adverse effects of pesticides used in banana plantations.

The people have been in the area even before banana plantations were established in their villages/communities.

Since many houses are too close to the banana canopy, their houses are directly sprayed with pesticides. But even houses as far as 50 meters from the edge of banana plantations complained that chemicals enter their houses every time aerial spraying is conducted.

Spraying is usually done at breakfast time. People very near the plantations have to stop eating, cover their food until spraying is done otherwise their food will be sprinkled with pesticides. This happens even if they close their window because most of their houses are not really closed – there are many holes, and windows are not made of glass. There are houses that use plastic sheet to cover their windows to protect them from pesticide drift especially during meal time.

They also have to rush to gather back their clothes that they have just hanged outside – to protect them from spray drift. Otherwise, they suffer skin itchiness if they wear directly those clothes hit by spray drift without washing them again. Their daily routine is changed; they have no peace of mind. If they are not at home when aerial spraying is conducted, they worry about their clothes, they worry if their windows are open, and they worry if children are playing in their yard.

Children going to school oftentimes have to hide under the banana canopy to avoid being drenched with pesticides – there have been no announcements given to the community prior to spraying. Only recently, that they put announcement on board – which are not very conspicuous and readable by all. Many passersby of the public roads have to experience being sprayed with chemicals because there are no buffer zones between banana plantations and public roads, in the same manner that buffer zone is not observed between houses and plantations, between bodies of water and plantations.

Our City Council after close to three (3) years of deliberation recently passed an ordinance banning aerial spraying, which was welcomed by the whole of Davao. Except for the plantation companies, of course.

Health Concerns

Their exposures to the chemicals have caused them to suffer several diseases such as skin and eye irritations. Many of the kids born in these communities have also become asthmatic. Others were even born with deformities.

One might wonder why in just one small street in two banana plantation communities – there are an unusual number of children with cerebral palsy/deformities.

There are many health concerns experienced by field workers especially those directly involved in the handling of chemicals. Many got sick and were just asked to stay home – due to weak lungs, low cholinesterase level, tuberculosis due to weak immune system. An interview with one community doctor reveals that he noticed an unusual number of TB cases since plantation proliferate in their area. He also said that the community health workers were also wondering about the unusual increase in TB cases among villagers. There are no new other industries in their village only banana and pineapple plantations.

It is not just the workers that are affected by their operation but also the many families –women and children – who continue to suffer many illnesses that they start experiencing only after plantations were established in their area.

Contamination of Scarce Water Supply

Being upland communities, access to potable drinking water is difficult. This makes them dependent on rainwater for drinking and for other domestic uses – cooking, washing dishes and clothes, and bathing.

But people had to stop drinking rainwater because their roofs catch directly the chemicals being sprayed in the bananas.

However, due to scarcity of water, they have no other choice but to continue using rainwater for bathing, washing and even for cooking; believing that boiling the water will cleanse the chemicals that intrude their water.

Damage to Non-target Crops

Farmers located near banana plantations suffered the most damaged on their crops particularly, coconuts. Since aerial spraying started in their villages, their coconut started to die and stopped bearing fruits. The young leaves and young fruits do not develop and just fall off. Some seemed to get burned by the chemicals released during aerial spraying.

A swarm of white insects coming from banana plantations transfer to small farmers' crops during aerial spraying and caused significant reduction in yield -as much as 90%. The insects seemed to stick on the leaves like glue until the leaves turned black and stop bearing fruits anymore.

It is not only the coconut trees that are damaged, even their daily source of vegetables, particularly green leafy vegetables such as horseradish, Ceylon spinach, water spinach, sweet potato tops, and taro leaves – these became inedible due to visible chemical spots deposited on them during aerial spraying. Like, the coconut trees, these vegetables also turned dry then withered few days after being hit by the pesticide drift. Those vegetables not severely hit by pesticides and do not die immediately were still eaten by some families after thoroughly washing them with water, because they have no other choice. The nearest market is quite far from their village and they have no extra money for this.

Unfair Labor Condition

One local study conducted by independent researchers concerning three communities with banana and pineapple plantations reveals the following findings:

“This is an emerging trend similar to labor-only contracting which is illegal under labor laws. To circumvent the law, the company organized a multi-purpose cooperative from which they can get their supply of workers instead of workers being hired through an “agency”.

“In one community some were promised regular employment in exchange for land lease but were hired instead as contractual workers; an unusual case for DOLE/ASIAPRO is that workers are “self-employed” and hence the “self-employed” status of their Social Security System and Philhealth membership is in question”.

“Also, almost one hundred percent (100%) of the workers agree that “it is only the company that is getting richer while the workers are getting poorer”. A plantation worker’s succinct articulation is: *this is but a natural condition; it is really the poor who make the rich get richer*”.

What is common in all plantation companies is the trend of hiring workers for 5 month-basis only because if the worker reaches 6 months they are obliged to make the workers regular employees and hence enjoy more benefits. Only those in the management level that get regular status. The field workers are just re hired after their contract ended and after they rest for some weeks or even months for others.

Interviews with some workers reveal that it is their wives that wash their uniforms used when spraying chemicals thereby exposing also other members of the family to pesticides by bringing home their used clothing exposed to pesticides. These items should be left in the workplace and someone should wash it for them.

Another abuse on workers is not following the specified number of hours as “no-entry interval” after the field is being aerially sprayed. They are asked to go back to work immediately sometimes even when pesticides are still dripping from banana leaves. They have no choice otherwise their number of work-hours will be deducted.

Unfair Contracts

Contracts whether grower-ship or leasehold type of contracts are onerous. This is the reason why plenty of growers are heavily indebted to the companies now. They owe hundreds of thousand pesos to the companies.

The rate of lease per hectare under leasehold contract is very cheap. Worst, they deduct from the total area leased the area that will be used for road network within their plantation because according to plantation management these areas are not productive. But the roads are primarily used for banana operations – monitoring, spraying, and harvesting. Thus, it is unfair that they will not include this in the computation of the rent.

In Davao del Norte, people sought the help of a lawyer to reformulate their contract. But there are still many land owners who just hope that their contracts will soon end so that they can take control of their land again.

Dismissive of People's Complaints

In the course of the campaign we have encountered PBGEA or the Philippine Banana Growers and Exporters Association several times – during committee hearings and technical working group meetings conducted by the Committee of Environment and Natural Resources of the Davao City Council.

In those meetings PBGEA was always dismissive of the complaints of the people especially those living near and inside their plantations who have been frequently sprayed by a concoction of pesticides they use during aerial spraying.

Aside from the committee hearings and technical working group meetings on the banning of aerial spraying, there have been dialogues also conducted at the community level. Again, the management of banana plantations was always dismissive of the complaints of the people – they never took responsibility of the damage they have caused to people, on their crops and on their immediate environment.

They took pride that their planes use GPS and supposedly very accurate in dispensing chemicals. But it is fact that GPS will only tell you the location where you are in, it cannot control the wind direction, nor it can control where the pesticides should be deposited once released by the plane.

They never recognized that people got sprayed with chemicals whether at home, on the roads or on their farms.

Some of these companies are big and influential here with close ties to political leaders in government that is why they are getting away with their violations.

Untruthful Reporting

They said they have biological buffer to protect non-target organisms as they claimed in their response to your question # 32 in your Import Risk Analysis (IRA) on Fresh Banana Fruit from the Philippines. The sad truth is that you cannot find this on the ground especially in Davao banana plantations.

When you came here in the Philippines they carefully select the plantations you visited. Thus, you were not able to see how some plantations in Davao City have encroached critical areas – very high elevation (more than 1200 masl) and steep slopes (without soil and water conservation measures).

Attached are some pictures of the plantations here in Davao where even sources of drinking water (spring) by the community is surrounded by banana plantation being aerially sprayed.

We noticed that their answers to your questions in the Risk Assessment are different on the answers they gave to us and to the committee of environment. Example on the dosage of fungicides being sprayed during aerial spraying – they claimed that what they sprayed are just fungicides (because only fungicides are allowed to be aerially sprayed according to our government regulation) - that these fungicides are mixed with a lot of water.

With regard to the dosage per aerial spraying schedule, this is what they said (quoted from the petition they filed in court, asking to nullify the ordinance):

"An active ingredient is only 0.1 li – 1.5 li per 30 liters of solution/hectare banana plantation. What is sprayed is mostly water- the dosage of fungicides applied to banana plantations and dispersed in the air are non-hazardous and will not pose any threat to the health of the people or to environment".

The above statement of PBGEA is not the same with their response to your Question # 8 and 13. They showed different calculations and more kinds of pesticides.

They also admitted to you that they and the Philippine government do not undertake pesticide residue monitoring so how can they say in Question # 32 that they maintain residue levels within defined/established MRLs. Not all banana plantations have environmental compliance certificates and reports of the Multisectoral Monitoring Team are considered confidential, affected communities were not given copies and they are not fully represented in the monitoring team.

When you asked in Question # 60 if there are any human or animal health issues associated with the production and consumption of Philippine banana?

They answered that the worst case is only skin allergies and that this is no longer a problem today after they stopped using trifluralin eight years ago. This is really a lie. Many workers were not renewed because of health problems they suffered after few months of working with them. The company just advised them to rest – they termed it stay home status. Workers cannot complain for fear of losing their jobs.

It is due to the above reasons that people in many villages where there is aerial spraying of pesticides have come together to campaign for the banning of aerial spraying.

There are numerous other stories but we also would like you to conduct an in-depth investigation in the communities where there are banana plantations.

We hope that before you decide on whether to allow Philippine bananas to be imported by your country we ask you to please consider the many lives/families that suffer for every banana produced.

We are not against the banana industry, what we are against of is the current practices they have and for being dismissive of people's complaints. Apparently, they do not have corporate social responsibility.

We really hope that our voices be heard as one of the stakeholders – directly affected by the banana operations.

Sincerely,

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The affected residents of Subasta, Wangan, Daliaon, Dacudao, Sirib, Tamayong and
Tigatto





