

High price of not being organic

Widespread and uncontrolled use of pesticides on banana plantations in the French Caribbean has left much of the islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe poisoned for a century to come, says a new report to the French parliament. The two islands and their 800,000 inhabitants face a "health disaster", with soaring rates of cancer and infertility, says cancer specialist Professor Dominique Belpomme.

Based on present trends, half the men of Martinique and Guadeloupe were likely to develop prostate cancer at some point in their lives, reckons Professor Belpomme. Birth defects in children were also becoming far more common, he warns.

Tests have shown that every child born in Guadeloupe is contaminated with chlordane, a highly toxic pesticide also known as kepone, which was banned in many countries in 1979. It was used legally in France until 1990 and in the French Caribbean until 1993. But it was used illegally – often sprayed by aeroplanes – to kill weevils in Martinique and Guadeloupe until as recently as 2002.

"The situation is extremely serious. The tests we carried out on pesticides show there is a health disaster in the Caribbean. The word is not too strong. Martinique and Guadeloupe have literally been poisoned," says the professor.

"The poisoning affects both land and water. Chlordane establishes itself in the clay and stays there for up to a century. As a result, the food chain is contaminated, especially water. In Martinique, most water sources are polluted.

Martinique and Guadeloupe produce more than 260,000 tonnes of bananas a year, worth £150m. The industry, which employs 15,000 people, also receives £90m in EU aid.

The islands, which are relatively poor compared with the French mainland, are already struggling to recover from Hurricane Dean, which devastated every banana plantation in Martinique and half of those in Guadeloupe last month. Many growers may find their soils and water tables so contaminated they will never be allowed to re-plant their crops.

Although the banana fruit itself is not affected by chlordane, the toxin can remain in soil for 100 years and is absorbed by humans through the skin and respiratory tract. Exposure to the powder can cause tremors, headaches, slurred speech, dizziness, memory loss, weight loss and sterility and raise the risk of developing cancer.

In early August, Guadeloupe's appeal court accepted a complaint against "persons unknown" for "poisoning" the island with pesticides. This opens up the possibility of a criminal investigation into the responsibility of successive French governments in failing to ban, or monitor, the illegal use of the chemicals.

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