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Policy Brief for MPs

Chemical Exports: Why the UK Must Stop Exporting and Importing Harmful Pesticides

We are seeking support from MPs to

Ask the Department of International Trade to create trade rules to:

1) Stop the export of paraquat and other toxic pesticides which are prohibited for use in the United Kingdom for health and environmental reasons.

2) Stop the import of agricultural products produced with pesticides banned for use in the UK

Ask the Health and Safety Executive to enforce existing trade rules related to banned pesticides.

What is the issue?

Investigations have revealed that in 2020 the UK Government permitted the export of over 12,000 tonnes of UK-manufactured 'Banned Pesticides'¹, despite these chemicals being banned for use in the UK. Loopholes in international trade law are allowing for companies such as British chemicals company Inovyn, and Swiss agricultural science giant Syngenta to manufacture these pesticides and export them to countries where they are permitted for use.²

How much does the UK export?

A recent investigation revealed that in 2020, 12,240,000 kilograms of pesticides prohibited from being used in the UK were manufactured for export to countries where their use is permitted. In 2018, the UK accounted for over 40% of Europe's Banned Pesticides exports, far more than any other country in the region for that year, and 87% of these UK exports contained the toxic pesticide paraquat.³

Where are these chemicals exported to?

UK-based companies notified exports of agricultural products containing banned pesticides to 20 different countries; four fifths of those intended destinations were low- or middle-income countries

¹ Public Eye and Unearthed, [Revealed: UK shipped more than 10,000 tonnes of banned pesticides overseas in 2020](#) (February 2022 2020)

² New York Times, [This Pesticide Is Prohibited in Britain. Why Is It Still Being Exported?](#) (26 December 2016)

³ Supra note 1.

(LMICs) such as Brazil, Colombia and India, where experts say hazardous pesticide use poses the greatest risks.⁴

The UK Government is currently pursuing trade agreements with both Brazil and India- which included agricultural products - so there is a clear risk that if we do not also introduce trade import standards produce covered in these deadly pesticides will be imported back into the UK to the detriment of UK consumers and farmers who will be undercut by low standard produce.

What is paraquat?

Paraquat - otherwise known by Syngenta's brand name 'Gramoxone' - is a highly toxic herbicide banned from use in over 50 countries including the UK due to the immense risks it poses to human health.

How dangerous is paraquat?

With paraquat "one sip can kill" and is likely to result in an agonising death spanning several days. There is currently no antidote, and paraquat continues to be a major cause of death in countries that allow the use of the pesticide, especially in low- and middle-income countries.

What are the impacts on human health?

Evidence exists and is mounting of the health impacts of chronic exposure to paraquat, including Parkinson's disease, lung damage and DNA damage among others. Paraquat is one of the oldest and most dangerous pesticides in the world. Tens of thousands of people - including many children - have died from ingesting this chemical since the British company Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI) first put Gramoxone on the market in 1962.

Do safer alternatives to paraquat exist?

Yes. Studies have shown paraquat can be formulated to be safer. Moreover, the revelations of a Syngenta whistleblower revealed the extent to which companies manufacturing paraquat have withheld safer alternative formulations for the purpose of economic gain; alternatives that could have saved countless lives.⁵

A total ban on exports is needed because:

1. **It is the ethical thing to do** – Dozens of UN human rights experts have urged all governments to urgently put an end to the export of Banned Pesticides.⁶ Recognizing the moral and ethical concerns of exporting such chemicals, in 2020 the European Commission proposed to 'ensure that hazardous chemicals banned in the European Union are not produced for export'⁷, with both France and Switzerland making the decision to end their exports. Despite this, the UK continues to turn a blind eye to the export of tens of thousands of tonnes of chemicals it believes can not be used safely, including to under-regulated markets around the world.
2. **Paraquat and other Banned Pesticides are being used in dangerous conditions** – These pesticides are exported to countries where agricultural workers are unlikely to wear the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) due to working in hot and humid climates. Paraquat is used ubiquitously on fields and plantations in high-risk conditions, and leaking equipment, inadequate training and inability to read safety information and warning signs further undermine the ability for workers to use these harmful pesticides safely.

⁴ Supra note 1.

⁵ Public Eye and Unearthed, [The Paraquat Papers: How Syngenta's bad science helped keep the world's deadliest weedkiller on the market](#) (March 2021)

⁶ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), [States Must Stop Exporting Unwanted Chemicals to Poorer Countries](#) (July 2020)

⁷ European Commission, [Chemical Strategy for Sustainability](#) (14 October 2020)

3. **It is irresponsible to assume that paraquat and other Banned Pesticides will be used safely** – In export destinations like Guatemala, Ecuador, India and Indonesia, among others, monitoring and enforcement is extremely weak. In Africa, U.N. figures have shown that less than 1% of workers use the recommended PPE for paraquat.⁸ Furthermore, the PPE recommended by Syngenta differs dramatically between countries with more robust regulatory systems, such as the United States and Canada, and those with weaker systems, further illustrating the double standards that characterise the export of Banned Pesticides.
4. **These chemicals are resulting in predictable and preventable deaths** – Between 2017 and 2019 nearly 200 people died from ingesting paraquat in India's eastern state of Odisha.⁹ In Brazil, the national health agency (ANVISA) documented paraquat as causing more deaths in the past decade than any other pesticide permitted for use. Similarly, in South Africa a large percentage of the reported cases of morbidity and death from pesticide poisoning was from using Syngenta's paraquat. The majority of these cases were reported as accidental, but a significant amount were reported as intentional, raising concerns about the pesticide's use for self-harm, especially among young people.¹⁰
5. **Child exposure to these harmful pesticides is a serious concern** – The World Health Organisation has reported that pesticides stored inside homes is a common cause of childhood poisoning, noting potential connections between children's exposure to pesticides and conditions such as congenital heart disease and leukemia.¹¹ Furthermore, reports of child labour in agriculture persist from countries that import these harmful pesticides¹², raising concerns about the role of UK exports in contributing to one of the most perilous forms of child labor.
6. **There is no reasonable expectation that the situation in importing states will change** – Given the limited financial resources of regulatory authorities in low- and middle-income countries, the likelihood of properly enforcing safety standards and use of appropriate PPE remains extremely low. There is also an unwillingness among politicians to enact the necessary changes: in India for example, the efforts of the medical community to prevent suicides by advocating for the ban of paraquat have resulted in zero action by the national government, merely half-hearted attempts to raise awareness by the state authorities in Odisha.

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⁸ Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade Chemical Review Committee, *Technical work: review of the proposal for Gramoxone Super as a severely hazardous pesticide formulation*, UNEP/FAO/RC/CRC.7 (22 December 2010)

⁹ Down to Earth, [There's no antidote to paraquat herbicide, ban it: Odisha docs to govt](#) (September 2019)

¹⁰ *An analysis of pesticide exposures reported to a poison control centre in South Africa over a 3-year period (2015-2018)*, (University of Cape Town, undated)

¹¹ European Parliament Policy Department,

¹² Institute of Development Studies, [Prevalence and impacts of child labour in agriculture](#), (20 October 2017)