

Dioxin's fatal toll in secret report

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By ANNE BESTON environment reporter

EXCLUSIVE - A secret Government report says New Zealanders have been exposed to unacceptable levels of the toxic chemical dioxin, which could cause up to 50 cancer deaths each year.

The report for Environment Minister Marian Hobbs was put before a cabinet committee late last year but has not been made public until now.

Ms Hobbs and her officials warned colleagues that its release "will need to be carefully managed ... to avoid any public alarm."

Its confidential proposals recommend that the Government set clean-up standards for contaminated sites and create limits on the amount of dioxin that can be discharged from industrial sources such as landfills and the pulp and paper industry.

The Herald has obtained the report as a dioxin health scare in New Plymouth gathers momentum. The Government says residents who may have been exposed to the chemical from the Ivon Watkins-Dow plant will be given blood tests.

Dioxin is a byproduct of the manufacture of the herbicide 2,4,5-T, which the plant produced from the early 1960s until 1987.

Although New Zealand no longer makes the herbicide, dioxin is produced through a range of industrial processes, including timber treatment, waste incineration and pulp and paper bleaching.

The chemical is highly toxic. It accumulates in dairy products and meat, mainly beef, milk, chicken, fish and eggs.

Women generally have higher levels of dioxin because it accumulates in body fat. The chemical enters the placenta of pregnant women and is passed on through breast milk.

Once into body cells, it causes the immune system to malfunction and interferes with hormones.

The report says New Zealanders' dietary intake of dioxin is 70 times above the daily limit recommended by the US Environmental Protection Agency.

Kiwis' exposure to dioxin is only a third of that for people living in Europe but the health effects are almost the same, it says.

Dioxin exposure gives Kiwis a lifetime risk of three to seven more cancers per 1000 people, says the report.

No other chemical causes the cancer risk to escalate as rapidly.

The latest available cancer statistics show 7382 deaths in 1997, making dioxin a possible factor in 22 to 51 cases.

The report makes special mention of breastfeeding because dioxin-like concentrations in infants have been found higher than in their mothers.

Ms Hobbs said the report would be released next month.

It was part of an on-going study of the health risks from toxic chemicals in the environment. Her staff were drawing up an environmental standard for dioxin.

Dioxin activist Gordon Jackman, a member of Greenpeace who in 1993 wrote a book on toxic chemical contamination in New Zealand, said the report did not go far enough to protect New Zealanders' health.

"I was amazed by the high level of exposure. It's horrendous. This is not the exposure of just some people but the background exposure to dioxin for the entire population."

At a meeting of more than 150 people in New Plymouth last night, health officials said they would investigate cancer rates in the area.

[The dioxin report - full text](#)

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