

Secrecy keeps lid on toxic cesspits

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JAMES GARDINER and WARREN GAMBLE go in search of our most polluted sites.

The dark side of New Zealand's clean green image is coming back to haunt us.

In the past fortnight, health officials have announced blood tests for residents living next to the former Ivon Watkins-Dow chemical plant in New Plymouth, and further moves towards an inquiry into timber workers' health problems from exposure to PCP (see glossary).

And this week, an Environment Ministry report showed New Zealanders were exposed to unacceptable levels of cancer-causing dioxins.

The Health Ministry says it has no information comparing rates of chemical-caused disease or birth defects in this country with others.

But various official reports have referred to the fact that while New Zealand does not have vast "smoke stack" industries that produce most of the dioxins in Europe, North America and Asia, our agricultural economy and enthusiasm for chemicals have in many ways made up for that.

"Illegal dumping has probably been a way of life for New Zealanders," says Environment Ministry senior policy analyst Howard Ellis. "As a country, we've been incredibly naive about the whole thing."

The environmental clean-up machinery is creaking into action, but awareness of sometimes decades-old pollution in our green land is still dim.

Your home may be sitting on a site contaminated by toxic chemicals without your knowledge and you may be forced to pay for the clean-up.

Yet councils and the Government are deliberately obstructing the public release of details of thousands of locations known to be - or suspected of being - poisoned.

Cleaning up the toxic errors of the past is one of the biggest bills New Zealanders face.

Every old gasworks, petrol station and drycleaning company has been tagged as a potential contaminated site - yet for hundreds, possibly thousands, more there are no records because of illegal dumping of hazardous substances.

Taxpayers' and ratepayers' money is being spent gathering information that councils and Government departments refuse to give out, except site by site and often only to owners or others with a legitimate interest in the property.

Property owners can pay \$150 a time to their local city or district council for a Land Information Management (LIM) report that should show whether the site is tagged as contaminated or potentially contaminated.

Regional councils have spent years building up lists of potentially contaminated sites after a report for the Environment Ministry concluded that 7200 locations in New Zealand were potentially contaminated, 1580 of them high risk and 3950 moderate risk.

That 1992 report, by Worley Consultants, did not identify sites but estimated the cost of cleaning up the high-risk sites alone would top \$500 million.

A further 600-plus sites used for timber treatment are contaminated with PCP.

In some cases no amount of money will be enough. The damage cannot be undone.

New technology is becoming available but some is untested outside laboratories and some is regarded as too expensive.

Officials of regional councils, fearful of lawsuits from landowners, refuse to identify contaminated sites.

One reason is that when they advised landowners their properties had been tagged as potentially contaminated, they promised not to release that information for fear it could prejudice future identification of contaminated sites.

In other words, the councils feel their best hope of getting compliance with the Resource Management Act is through cooperation with landowners. The price of that is secrecy.

Landowners fear their livelihoods or the value of their investments will suffer if their land becomes publicly known as contaminated, however minor the contamination.

Says Environment Canterbury's contaminated sites officer Dave Clancey: "We have to be very careful how we identify those sites. The danger is a small service station gets lumped into the same category of 'contaminated' as, say, the site at Mapua or the site adjacent to Hanmer."

The West Coast Regional Council has a list of more than 400 sites potentially contaminated with hazardous substances. These range from the old Westport gas works to sheep dips on farms. It will hire a student next month to begin what it expects to be a two-year verification process.

Greens health spokeswoman Sue Kedgley says a national register of contaminated sites should be a priority.

"We all have a right to know. There's an overriding public health issue at stake."

Some councils also appear to want to avoid flak from environmental groups.

The Hawkes Bay Regional Council initially said a Carter Holt Harvey timber treatment plant in Napier had been cleaned up, then environmental group manager Sue Powell rang back to say that information was confidential.

The council had a few problems with "one or two agitating organisations" which liked to speculate about such issues, she said.

Councils say they have limited powers to make landowners or occupiers report contamination. Only section 17 of the act, which says everyone has a duty to avoid, remedy or mitigate harmful effects on the environment, is helpful, says Mr Clancey.

He refused to make public a list of contaminated sites or even to identify the most significant ones in the region and would respond to a specific request about a specific site, in this case Hanmer, only after clearance from the site owner, the Land Information department.

The Auckland Regional Council's contamination team leader, Eddie Grogan, says mandatory disclosure would be immensely helpful because "people are always going to try to get away with things." But again the council did not disclose blanket lists because of the threat of lawsuits.

Gordon Jackman, a former toxics campaigner with Greenpeace now working with the Gisborne Environment Centre, a coalition of private environmental activists, says the performance of central and local government in dealing with the problems has been generally poor.

Some regional councils - he acknowledges Waikato as "one of the better ones" - have made more effort than others.

The Environment Ministry, Mr Jackman says, was asked more than eight years ago to compile a national register of contaminated sites and still has not done so.

The ministry defends itself, saying regional councils had needed time to perform their own, often long and complex site investigations and compile registers.

Mr Ellis says it makes no sense to duplicate regional registers by having a detailed national database. Uniform reporting systems in the next few years will give the ministry overall statistics, putting sites into risk categories.

Councils would be open to "frivolous and incredibly expensive" inquiries if blanket regional lists were given out.

An amendment to the act is expected to be introduced this year making it retrospective, meaning polluters, owners or occupiers of land contaminated before 1991 can face civil action in the Environment Court and be forced to pay clean-up costs.

As Mr Ellis says, while everyone wants the best outcomes, the issues are so big and the task of dealing with them so immense that the costs are often beyond the budget of local and even central Government.

To which the obvious rejoinder is: what will be the cost of not taking rapid action?

DANGER LIST

* Organochlorines: Chemicals combining carbon and chlorine. Some are found in nature, others are byproducts of combustion

and industrial processes.

- * Dioxins: The most toxic of the organochlorine family. Byproducts from burning and chemical processes with chlorine. Some dioxins can cause cancer and have been linked to immune and reproductive effects. High exposure causes severe skin rash, chloracne.
- * PCP (pentachlorophenol): Used as a fungicide and preservative in timber treatment until it was phased out in 1988. Toxic in its own right, and contains dioxins as well.
- * Dieldrin: Organochlorine insecticide used in agriculture and timber processing. Banned in New Zealand in 1968 for agriculture, and 1989 for all other uses such as spider control.
- * DDT: Organochlorine insecticide used to control pasture pests. Banned on farmland in 1970 and for all other uses such as borer bombs in 1989.
- * PCBs: Polychlorinated biphenols. Used in the electrical supply industry, mainly found in transformers and capacitors, but also in paint additives and some plastics. Banned since 1994 and shipped overseas. Linked to liver damage and respiratory problems.

[The dioxin report - full text](#)

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