

# Apocalypse Now! Insects, Pesticide and a Public Health Crisis

By [Colin Todhunter](#)

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Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#)

*In 2017, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Hilal Elver, and UN Special Rapporteur on Toxics, Baskut Tuncak, produced a [report](#) that called for a comprehensive new global treaty to regulate and phase out the use of dangerous pesticides in farming and move towards sustainable agricultural practices.*

In addition to the devastating impacts on human health, the two authors argued that the excessive use of pesticides contaminates soil and water sources, causing loss of biodiversity, the destruction of the natural enemies of pests and the reduction in the nutritional value of food. They drew attention to denials by the agroindustry of the hazards of certain pesticides and expressed concern about aggressive, unethical marketing tactics that remain unchallenged and the huge sums spent by the powerful chemical industry to influence policymakers and contest scientific evidence.

At the time, Elver said that agroecological approaches, which replace harmful chemicals, are capable of delivering sufficient yields to feed and nourish the entire world population, without undermining the rights of future generations to adequate food and health. The two authors added that it was time to overturn the myth that pesticides are necessary to feed the world and create a global process to transition toward safer and healthier food and agricultural production.

The authors were adamant that access to healthy, uncontaminated food is a human rights issue.

And this is not lost on environmental campaigner Dr Rosemary Mason who has just sent a detailed open letter/report to Minette Batters, president of the National Farmers Union (NFU) in the UK – '[Open Letter to the National Farmers Union About Fraud in Europe and the UK](#)'. Mason's report contains a good deal of information about pesticides, health and the environment.

Health impacts aside, Mason decided to write to Batters because it is increasingly clear that pesticides are responsible for declines in insects and wildlife, something which the NFU has consistently denied.

In 2017, the Soil Association obtained figures from FERA Science Ltd under a freedom of information request. Using data extracted for the first time from the records of FERA Science Ltd, which holds UK Government data on pesticide use in farming, it was found that pesticide active ingredients applied to three British crops have increased markedly. The data covered British staples wheat, potatoes and onions. Far from a 50% cut – which the NFU had claimed – the increase in active ingredients applied to these crops range from 480% to 1,700% over the last 40-odd years.

## Health of the nation

Mason's aim is to make Batters aware that chemical-dependent, industrial agriculture is a major cause of an ongoing public health crisis and is largely responsible for an unfolding, catastrophic ecological collapse in the UK and globally. Mason places agrochemicals at the centre of her argument, especially globally ubiquitous glyphosate-based herbicides, the use of which have spiralled over the last few decades.

Batters is given information about important studies that suggest glyphosate causes epigenetic changes in humans and animals (diseases skip a generation before appearing) and that it is a major cause of severe obesity in children in the UK, not least because of its impact on the gut microbiome. As a result, Mason says, we are facing a global metabolic health crisis that places glyphosate at the heart of the matter.

And yet glyphosate may be on the market because of fraud. Mason points out that a new study has revealed the Laboratory of Pharmacology and Toxicology (LPT) in Hamburg has committed fraud in a series of regulatory tests, several of which had been carried out as part of the glyphosate re-approval process in 2017. At least 14% of new regulatory studies submitted for the re-approval of glyphosate were conducted by LPT Hamburg. The number could be higher, as this information in the dossiers often remains undisclosed to the public.

In light of this, Angeliki Lyssimachou, environmental toxicologist at Pesticide Action Network Europe, says:

"The vast majority of studies leading to the approval of a pesticide are carried out by the pesticide industry itself, either directly or via contract laboratories such as LPT Hamburg... Our 140+ NGO coalition 'Citizens for Science in Pesticide Regulation' regularly calls on the (European) Commission to quit this scandalous process: tests must be carried out by independent laboratories under public scrutiny, while the financing of studies should be supported by industry."

Mason then outlines the state of public health in the UK. A report, 'The Health of the Nation: A Strategy for Healthier Longer Lives', written by the [All-Party Parliamentary Group \(APPG\) for Longevity](#) found that women in the UK are living for 29 years in poor health and men for 23 years: an increase of 50% for women and 42% for men on previous estimates based on self-reported data.

In 2035, there will be around 16 million cases of dementia, arthritis, type 2 diabetes and cancers in people aged 65 and over in the UK – twice as many as in 2015. In 10 years, there will be 5.5 million people with type 2 diabetes while 70% of people aged 55+ will have at least one obesity-related disease.

The report found that the number of major illnesses suffered by older people will increase by 85% between 2015 and 2035.

## Ecological collapse

Batters is also made aware that there is an insect apocalypse due to pesticides – numerous studies have indicated catastrophic declines. Mason mentions two scientific studies of the number of insects splattered by cars that have revealed a huge decline in abundance at

European sites in two decades. The research adds to growing evidence of what some scientists have called an “[insect apocalypse](#)”, which is threatening a collapse in the natural world that sustains humans and all life on Earth. A third study which Mason mentions shows plummeting numbers of aquatic insects in streams.

The survey of insects hitting car windscreens in rural [Denmark](#) used data collected every summer from 1997 to 2017 and found an 80% decline in abundance. It also found a parallel decline in the number of swallows and martins, birds that live on insects.

Matt Shardlow, the chief executive of the charity [Buglife](#), says:

“These new studies reinforce our understanding of the dangerously rapid disappearance of insect life in both the air and water... It is essential we create more joined up space for insects that is safe from pesticides, climate change and other harm.”

Of course, it is not just insects that have been affected. Mason provides disturbing evidence of the decline in British wildlife in general.

Conning the public

Mason argues that the public are being hoodwinked by officials who dance to the tune of the agrochemical conglomerates. For instance, she argues that Cancer Research UK (CRUK) has been hijacked by the agrochemical industry: David Cameron appointed Michael Pragnell, founder of Syngenta to the board of CRUK in 2010 and he became Chairman in 2011.

She asserts that CRUK invented causes of cancer and put the blame on the people for lifestyle choices:

“A red-herring fabricated by industry and ‘top’ doctors in Britain: alcohol was claimed to be linked to seven forms of cancer: this ‘alleged fact’ was endlessly reinforced by the UK media until people in the UK were brainwashed.”

By 2018, CRUK was also claiming that obesity caused 13 different cancers and that obesity was due to ‘lifestyle choice’.

Each year there are steady increases in the numbers of new cancers in the UK and increases in deaths from the same cancers. Mason says that treatments are having no impact on the numbers.

She argues that the Francis Crick Institute in London with its ‘world class resources’ is failing to improve people’s lives with its treatments and is merely strengthening the pesticides and pharmaceutical industries. The institute is analysing people’s genetic profile with what Mason says is an “empty promise” that one day they could tailor therapy to the individual patient. Mason adds that CRUK is a major funder of the Crick Institute.

The public is being conned, according to Mason, by contributing to ‘cancer research’ with the fraudulent promise of ‘cures’ based on highly profitable drugs manufactured by pharmaceutical companies whose links to the agrochemical sector are clear. CRUK’s research is funded entirely by the public, whose donations support over 4,000 scientists,

doctors and nurses across the UK. Several hundred of these scientists worked at CRUK's London Research Institute at Lincoln's Inn Fields and Clare Hall (LRI), which became part of the Crick institute in 2015.

Mason notes that recent research involving the Crick Institute that has claimed 'breakthroughs' in discoveries about the genome and cancer genetics are misleading. The work was carried out as part of the Pan-Cancer Analysis of Whole Genomes project, which claims to be the most comprehensive study of cancer genetics to date. The emphasis is on mapping genetic changes and early diagnosis

However, Mason says such research misses the point – most cancers are not inherited. She says:

"The genetic damage is caused by mutations secondary to a lifetimes' exposure to thousands of synthetic chemicals that contaminate the blood and urine of nearly every person tested – a global mass poisoning."

And she supports her claim by citing research by Lisa Gross and Linda Birnbaum which argues that in the US 60,000-plus chemicals already in use were grandfathered into the law on the assumption that they were safe. Moreover, the EPA faced numerous hurdles, including pushback from the chemical industry, that undermined its ability to implement the law. Today, hundreds of industrial chemicals contaminate the blood and urine of nearly every person tested – in the US and beyond.

Mason refers to another study by Maricel V Maffini, Thomas G Neltner and Sarah Vogel which notes that thousands of chemicals have entered the food system, but their long-term, chronic effects have been woefully understudied and their health risks inadequately assessed. As if to underline this, recent media reports have focused on Jeremy Bentham, a well-respected CEO of an asset management company, who argued that infertility caused by endocrine disrupting chemicals will wipe out humans.

Mason argues that glyphosate-based Roundup has caused a 50% decrease in sperm count in males: Roundup disrupts male reproductive functions by triggering calcium-mediated cell death in rat testis and Sertoli cells. She also notes that Roundup causes infertility – based on studies that were carried out in South America and which were ignored by regulators in Europe when relicensing glyphosate.

### Neoliberal global landscape

Mason draws on a good deal of important (recent) research and media reports to produce a convincing narrative. But what she outlines is not specific to Britain. For instance, the human and environmental costs of pesticides in Argentina have been well documented and in India Punjab has become a 'cancer capital' due to pesticide contamination.

UN Special Rapporteurs Elver and Tuncak argue that while scientific research confirms the adverse effects of pesticides, proving a definitive link between exposure and human diseases or conditions or harm to the ecosystem presents a considerable challenge, especially given the systematic denial by the pesticide and agro-industry of the magnitude of the damage inflicted by these chemicals.

In the meantime, we are told that many diseases and illnesses are the result of personal

choice or lifestyle behaviour. It has become highly convenient for public officials and industry mouthpieces to place the blame on ordinary people, while fraudulent science, regulatory delinquency and institutional corruption allows toxic food to enter the marketplace and the agrochemical industry to rake in massive profits.

Health outcomes are merely regarded as the result of individual choices, rather than the outcome of fraudulent activities which have become embedded in political structures and macro-economic 'free' market policies. In the brave new world of neoliberalism and 'consumer choice', it suits industry and its crony politicians and representatives to convince ordinary people to internalise notions of personal responsibility and self-blame.

*Readers are urged to read Rosemary Mason's [new report](#) which can be downloaded from the [academia.edu](http://academia.edu) website.*

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