

Transcript of Story from -- 60 Minutes: Australia

Poisoned

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Fruit and veges are supposed to be the healthy option. But what if we were to tell you that Australia's fruit and vegetables are sprayed with chemicals that are considered so dangerous they're banned around the world?

Liz Hayes spent a hellish few weeks, witnessing the effects of these poisons in other countries. And it's a horror show.

Liz met a young man with no eyes, saw fish with two heads and trekked to a village full of horribly deformed children. And visited a farm on Queensland's Sunshine Coast where the animals are dying.

Worst of all, the people who are supposed to be protecting us are pretending it's not happening.

Full transcript below:

STORY - GWEN GILSON: I hope you're very proud of what you're doing!

LIZ HAYES: Gwen Gilson is mad as hell.

GWEN GILSON: What poisons are you using today, sir?

LIZ HAYES: Armed only with her video camera, this Queensland fish breeder is trying to protect her home. From potentially deadly chemicals being sprayed on the macadamia farm next door.

GWEN GILSON: My animals have died from the chemicals you macadamia farmers are using and they're deformed tens of millions of embryos.

TROY ZIESEMER: That's your opinion, Gwen, it's up to you to prove that. If you're got a case it's up to you to prove that.

GWEN GILSON: But it just takes time, we just want you to stop killing in the meantime.

TROY ZIESEMER: I'm not killing. I'm not killing.

LIZ HAYES: So you believe you're being poisoned?

GWEN GILSON: Yes.

LIZ HAYES: For Gwen Gilson it began with this horrifying discovery - fish embryos born with two heads.

GWEN GILSON: This is an Australian bass that's got two heads. Then, her farm animals began to fall sick and die.

GWEN GILSON: This is Tootie. He's only been up for a little while, he can't walk, he's shaking, his eyes are twitching. We're pretty scared. I've had...I've buried three horses. There is a stiffness in her gait. All of the other animals, Jackson, my dog included, the ducks and the chooks, have all got something wrong with their blood. And now I've got a problem with my liver too.

LIZ HAYES: None of it made sense. For 20 years, Gwen Gilson had successfully bred fish at her Sunland Hatchery at Noosa on the Sunshine Coast.

GWEN GILSON: Everywhere you look there's just dead fish. You macadamia farmers have got a hell of a lot to answer for.

LIZ HAYES: But Gwen's battle goes way beyond her boundary fence, it may have repercussions for us all. As you'll see, the impact of these farm chemicals, endosulfan and carbendazim, can be disastrous. And in most places throughout the world, their use is illegal.

MATT LANDOS: When 62 countries go ahead and ban a chemical, they don't do it on a whim, they do it based on data and out of concern for their people and their environment. In Australia, we either have less concern for our people and environment, and I think that's the core root of it all, because we simply have less regard.

LIZ HAYES: I love fruit and vegetables, but now I'm worried about what might have been sprayed on them, because foods like avocados, potatoes, tomatoes, broccoli, capsicum, cauliflower - even eggplant - are all regularly sprayed with a pesticide called endosulfan. And other fruits and vegetables, including one of my favourites, strawberries, are sprayed with a fungicide called carbendazim. Both these poisons have been banned or withdrawn from sale from so many countries around the world. But here in Australia, those poisons are used on food that you and I eat every day. I don't think the average person knows what chemicals they may be exposed to?

GWEN GILSON: Well, that's correct because you look at, if you buy a tin of food in the supermarket, it's got to have listed all the chemicals that's on it. You go and buy fresh fruit, vegetables or nuts, and there is nowhere that it tells you what chemicals have been used to produce it. Surely, you know, we should be in a society where we're allowed to make a choice.

LIZ HAYES: You've been to Sunland Hatchery and conducted exhaustive tests, do you believe that farm chemicals are killing Gwen Gilson's fish?

MATT LANDOS: Ah yes, I think it's the most likely cause of all of the syndromes that have been observed.

LIZ HAYES: Scientist Matt Landos is the specialist fish vet Gwen employed to investigate. Where are these chemicals coming from?

MATT LANDOS: The ones immediately on the farm are likely to come from the closest source, which is a neighbouring macadamia plantation.

LIZ HAYES: But it was Gwen who made an even more disturbing discovery.

GWEN GILSON: There you can see his two heads, fairly clearly.

LIZ HAYES: She found fish taken from the nearby Noosa River, which flows through the region's farmlands, were producing severely deformed embryos.

GWEN GILSON: You can actually see the heartbeat - or is it a pulse of some kind - in the yolk sac.

LIZ HAYES: Further tests detected chemicals like carbendazim and endosulfan were now in the local lake and river system. Chemicals known to cause birth defects in humans.

MATT LANDOS: Carbendazim is a fungicide, but it's quite well published that it affects the development of the embryo. Carbendazim affects human fetuses.

GWEN GILSON: When you look at the birth defects, I've actually got little silver perch that were born without eyes, and that is one of the side effects of carbendazim.

LIZ HAYES: Side effects that the rest of world is well aware of.

KHALID MEMON: (SINGS) # I want to see the colour of the sky... #

LIZ HAYES: In the UK, 24-year-old Khalid Memon believes his exposure to carbendazim is to blame for his disabilities.

KHALID MEMON: (SINGS) # I want to see the rain, I want it to hit my face...

JUVERIA MEMON: I had a very healthy pregnancy and it was only when he was born that

his father said, "Why hasn't he opened his eyes?"

LIZ HAYES: His mother, Juveria, had no idea there were any problems until Khalid was born.

JUVERIA MEMON: They took him away and then they took me up to a room and then they came in and said, "Oh sorry, we've got some bad news. "Your son is blind." And his father said, "What do you mean?" And they said, "Well, he hasn't got any eyes.

LIZ HAYES: The family used Benlate, a carbendazim-related product in the garden.

JUVERIA MEMON: I would have been spraying it in the very early stages of my pregnancy.

LIZ HAYES: And what was the purpose of the the spraying? What kind of things were you spraying in the garden? JUVERIA MEMON: It's a fungicide, you know. So you spray roses, you spray apple trees, you spray vegetables. You spray something quite happily because you, there's no warnings on it.

LIZ HAYES: Juveria and Khalid joined 11 others in a class action, suing the manufacturer, Dupont, for damages. But both mother and son refused an offer of \$150,000 to settle the case.

JUVERIA MEMON: He's got brain damage. He's got brain lesions. He's got a malfunctioning pituitary, which means he never became a man, never became a man. He won't ever become a man.

LIZ HAYES: But if you want even more proof of the shocking effect of these farm chemicals on humans, you need go no further than the state of Kerala in India. They call this 'God's Own Country' and I can understand why. It's one of the more beautiful parts of India's countryside. But what's been happening here over the past few years has been nothing short of a horror story. These cashew nuts plantations have sprayed with a pesticide, tonnes of the stuff, year after year. And the residue would wash down these hills and into the local water supply. The villagers were told it was harmless. But that was not true. The pesticide was endosulfan, and the locals were being slowly and horribly poisoned. In this remote corner of India, the human suffering goes largely unseen. In the village of Padre, Dr Mohane Kumar is doing his rounds.

DR MOHANE KUMAR: He has got a lot of determination, nowadays.

LIZ HAYES: His young patients live in or near the local cashew nut plantations, and it was Dr Kumar who first realised they were victims of endosulfan poisoning. Are you convinced that is the case?

DR MOHANE KUMAR: We are, definitely.

LIZ HAYES: No doubt?

DR MOHANE KUMAR: No doubt about that one and that one, it was scientifically proved here.

LIZ HAYES: It's five years now since the plantation was forced to stop spraying and the state government agreed to pay compensation. But for the victims, it's a lifetime of suffering. So the deformity of the hand is an example?

DR MOHANE KUMAR: Yes it's very bad, it's a classical case.

LIZ HAYES: So many people in this district are treated for central nervous system disorders, appalling skin conditions, mental retardation, cancers, dreadful deformities, cerebral palsy, liver problems - all attributed to endosulfan. The same chemical found in the drinking water of Gwen Gilson's neighbours in Noosa.

GWEN GILSON: OK, we're trying to make a little bit of smoke.

LIZ HAYES: Meanwhile, the macadamia farmer is spraying again.

GWEN GILSON: I don't know if the smoke will show up on the camera. They're spraying from behind the fire.

LIZ HAYES: So Gwen is lighting smoke fires on her own property, to show the wind is blowing the spray back over her fish ponds.

GWEN GILSON: There's my shed, and it's coming straight over my hatchery - look at it all!

LIZ HAYES: Farmer Troy Ziesemer refused to be interviewed, but maintains the chemicals he's using stay on his side of the fence.

GWEN GILSON: See that, Troy? It's going the wrong way!

MAN ON GWEN GILSON'S FARM: Serial bloody killers!

GWEN GILSON: There's Troy, he's taking off now, because he doesn't want to see the wind going the wrong way. I'm shaking so much now, I'm so bloody... ..this is just absolutely wrong. What is wrong with the bloody world today?

LIZ HAYES: So these are where your very last fish are?

GWEN GILSON: Yes.

LIZ HAYES: This is now a Gwen and Goliath battle. She's up against a powerful industry and a pitifully slow-moving pesticides regulator. She has alerted us all to the dangers of farm chemicals, but it's come at a terrible personal cost. Why not leave?

GWEN GILSON: I've got nowhere to go. I guess that's sort of one of the worst things. This is my home. It's really terrible that I've lost all my horses, my pets, my dog. Um, just has to stop.

LIZ HAYES: It's taken a terrible toll.?

GWEN GILSON: Yeah. And it's no, you know, I mean if you look around, it's really a beautiful place to live, isn't it? But there's nothing nice about it any more. It's like a paradise lost.