

Stockpiled Pesticides Harming African People

Leon Marshall in Johannesburg for [National Geographic News](#) November 4, 2005

Vast quantities of obsolete pesticides pose a serious danger to the environment and communities in Africa.

In many countries the toxic chemicals have started to leak from corroding containers and are seeping into soil, groundwater, and rivers. Now a multimillion dollar international project is underway to rid the continent of the menace. The Africa Stockpiles Program (ASP) will soon send trained personnel to inventory pesticide stockpiles and begin their safe export to Europe for incineration. Angela Mwandla, the program's coordinator, says estimates of government-controlled stockpiles top 50,000 tons. Private pesticide dumps could raise the figure significantly.

Nearly every African country grapples with the problem. Ethiopia is one of the worst off, with an estimated 3,000 tons of obsolete pesticides. Mwandla, who is based in Nairobi, Kenya, says the cleanup program could take 15 years and cost about 250 million dollars (U.S.). The program's first phase—estimated to cost 60 million dollars (U.S.) over six years—will kick off in Ethiopia, Mali, Tunisia, Morocco, Tanzania, and South Africa.

Africa's stockpiles of poisonous chemicals have been accumulating over the past 40 years and longer. The problem has been spurred by poor training, weak controls, and aggressive marketing by chemical manufacturers, who sold countries more pesticides than they needed. Jan Betlem, a Dutch specialist in obsolete-pesticide elimination, painted a grim picture at a recent media briefing in Nairobi, where the cleanup program was announced. He said many of the stockpiles were found in neglected buildings. Others were found in drums in grasslands, where they were covered by torn tarpaulins and plastic sheets or buried. Many containers were corroding, adding spillage to the list of contamination problems. Toxins that have seeped into soils and groundwater have contaminated food, drinking water, and the air. Betlem has often found dead cats, birds, snakes, goats, and sheep inside and around buildings where corroded containers have started leaking. It is not unusual for children to play in the vicinity of the stockpiles. The meat of animals grazing in such areas is sold in public markets, adding to the buildup of toxins in people. Betlem says pesticides are normally obsolete for their intended use after two years, but remain hazardous.

More than a decade ago, the UN Food and Agricultural Organization began warning African nations and others about the dangers of negligent pesticide use. But the Africa Stockpiles Program springs mainly from an initiative started in 2000 by the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF). Mwandla, who is with the WWF's Nairobi office, says ASP is a joint effort that involves the Global Environment Facility (GEF), governments, non-governmental organizations, and pesticide manufacturers through their international federation called CropLife. ASP's major donors are the World Bank, on behalf of the GEF, and European governments. It has also been endorsed by the African Union's ministerial conference on the environment.

John Aston, representing CropLife at the media briefing in Nairobi, said there were no facilities in Africa capable of destroying the chemicals to internationally required standards. Pesticides need to be incinerated at temperatures of at least 1,650°F (900°C) to limit harmful emissions. It was therefore necessary to export the chemicals to facilities in places such as Wales and Finland, where they can be safely destroyed.

He said the pesticide manufacturers were closely involved in the cleanup operation and in training people to properly handle and use the chemicals. In Ethiopia pesticide manufacturers have already helped dispose of about 800 tons of obsolete material, even though many of the mountainous country's approximately 900 stockpiles were held in practically inaccessible areas.

Questions about the article : Stockpiled Pesticides Harming African People

Are the sentences below right or wrong, according to the text ?
Circle **R** (for "right") or **W** (for "wrong") after each question.

RIGHT / WRONG QUESTIONS

1	R / W	Skilled workers have been sent to Africa to organise the shipment of toxic chemicals to Europe.
2	R / W	Many African countries have the same problem, but in Ethiopia, the situation is more worrying than in other countries..
3	R / W	Ethiopia, Mali, Tunisia, Morocco, Tanzania, and South Africa have been excluded from the cleanup program.
4	R / W	For 40 years at least, African countries have bought unnecessary quantities of pesticides.
5	R / W	According to Jan Betlem, a European scientist, pesticides have been stocked in unsatisfactory conditions.
6	R / W	Children are never left to play in areas poisoned by pesticides.
7	R / W	After 2 years of storage, pesticides are no longer dangerous.
8	R / W	Initially, WWF was against the ASP cleanup operations.
9	R / W	John Ashton would prefer the chemicals to be destroyed in Africa, to reduce costs.
10	R / W	Pesticide manufacturers are taking part in the cleanup operations.