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Media Release 22 March 2006.

On the opening day of the People's Inquiry Commissioners to the People's Inquiry heard oral testimony of dreadful health effects, including chemical burning of the lungs, numerous hospitalisations for breathing problems, and the exacerbation of numerous serious health conditions, as well as huge disruption in the lives of families' rights across West Auckland.

'Something happened to my beautiful New Zealand. People were hurt and harmed so much and nobody was there to hear it,' said one of the first residents giving evidence at the Peoples Inquiry in Waitakere today. The People's Inquiry which is a world first, is a process whereby residents affected by aerial spraying can tell the stories of the spray's impact to a panel of national and international Commissioners. This morning, Commissioners to the People's Inquiry heard oral testimony of dreadful health effects, including chemical burning of the lungs, numerous hospitalisations for breathing problems, and the exacerbation of numerous serious health conditions, as well as huge disruption in the lives of families' rights across West Auckland. A violent coughing condition known as the 'moth cough' was described as common amongst residents. Skin conditions which were so severe that the skin swelled and split, and severe eye irritation which only occurred during spray episodes were often attributed by MAF and some doctors as generic or work related allergies. The Inquiry also heard stories of loss of income, loss of businesses, days off work, stressed family relationships and loss of well being. A mechanic lost his Waitakere business because chemical sprays forced him to leave on spray days. Costs of medication for complex medical conditions have been huge for many individuals. A number of people had been forced to relocate from Waitakere at great personal cost and often at the last minute, being informed at between 3am - 4.30am on spray days that they had to pack up and leave. Others were not informed until it was too late. 'I was told by the MAF Help Desk to leave the area. I had to leave my family and my animals. I had to buy accommodation and food. It was terribly inconvenient to relocate my life' one resident said. As one resident said 'We have all the letters the doctors, the MPs we approached, we tried to go through all the channels and do the right thing but got no help from specialist Doctors contracted by MAF.' 'We have been lied to' another said, 'and the cruellest thing is that there has been no apology or acknowledgement. A number of residents with ongoing symptoms felt they were being treated as victims of psychosomatic delusions and all were critical of the information provided to them about the effects of the aerial spray. Several were told by doctors contracted by MAF 'You did it all to yourself' and that the spray was safe. Many people giving testimony are now so chemically sensitised that any exposure to chemicals such as in supermarket aisles full of chemically based products or roadside sprays cause a re occurrence of some very severe symptoms. Another resident told the Inquiry that a huge injustice had been done to the people of West Auckland. And that MAF and AerAqua (the medical contractors) are perpetuating a huge denial of that injustice. 'It is terrible to hear the stories of previously healthy people experiencing such severe symptoms and the way they have been treated when they have appealed for help,' said Dr Meriel Watts from the Peoples Inquiry. 'These people feel utterly betrayed by the Government and some senior health professionals'. The Inquiry, including testimony from international visitors who have survived pesticide poisoning, continues until Tuesday March 28th. Thursday afternoon will see technical testimonies presented by an epidemiologist, an entomologist, scientist and community public health expert who will give their understanding of the impacts of the spray and the program on the community. This will be followed by a forum discussion.