

## April 2006: Aerial Sprays Force Woman into Exile

April 2006: "AERIAL SPRAYS FORCE WOMAN INTO EXILE" by Jennifer Mourin, PANAP, Pesticide Action Network Asia Pacific.

Sally Lewis has become fairly famous in New Zealand. But it's not because she created film magic by telling stories of brave hobbits, rings and saving "middle earth", nor is it due to winning a surprise gold medal for squash at the Commonwealth games.

No, Sally Lewis is well known and almost "infamous" with the media in her homeland because she is an angry woman, who will not let what happened to her, happen to any more people as a result of the aerial spraying the authorities conducted around West Auckland. She is also heartbroken because the life threatening health effects of the sprays are forcing her to leave her country in order to save her life.

When the Toxic Sprays Began

Sally had always prided herself for being a fit person. She was active in her job teaching farming to secondary school children, and was the assistant manager of the school farm. She was also a keen swimmer, and went fishing and yacht racing during the weekend. Sally lived in West Auckland and the trouble began with the aerial spraying which started on 21 January 2002. Within 20 minutes of the spray raining down from the plane, she found herself choking for breath. "The smell was atrocious! It smelt like cat pee", she said, recalling the strong feline urine smell, while giving her testimony at the Peoples Inquiry at the Waitakere City Council Chambers.

But more than the smell, it was the effects on her lungs that had her gasping for breath, choking and wheezing. She rushed to her local doctor, who immediately put her on a nebuliser for an hour to help her breathe, and this continued six times throughout the day. As an asthmatic for over 30 years, and managing to keep it under control, she was very concerned when she first learned about the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry's (MAF) spray programme. She called the hot-line, and was told to leave the district if she thought it would be safer, but was also assured that "there was no need to worry as the spray was harmless".

The trauma of the effect was such that Sally began keeping a diary documenting when the spraying occurred and the effects she suffered. Of the coughs she continued to suffer days after the first sprays, she noted, "I wake up at nights coughing...I cough during the day constantly, the cough is not a normal sounding cough, it is a rasping cough that sounds like a seal barking..."

Even more disturbing was the effect on her skin. After the second spraying episode about a month later, Sally developed a rash all over her body. She took a shower in the hope of washing off any of the spray debris she may have gotten on her skin. To her horror, after 3 hours under the shower, her skin was literally "bubbling" as if someone had sprayed acid on her. She went to her doctor, who then called Aer'Aqua—the medical team appointed by the MAF to handle any medical cases arising from the spraying. Their appointed specialist was horrified at what he saw, and told her she had "airborne dermatitis", or "airborne eczema" due to the spraying. She carries the scars of those burning rashes till today, and has to apply medication everyday. At the time, the specialist also advised her to leave the area during spraying, and not to return to her residence until 48 hours after the spraying.

But Sally suffered a litany of other health effects as a result of the spraying—her breathing difficulties continued; her eyes would weep, oozing a crusty discharge and were red from irritation; and she suffered nose ulcers and bleeds.

Of Platitudes and Lies

After seeking treatment the first time, Sally was subsequently ignored by the Aer'Aqua medical team and she was told that she had been too late in registering onto their health list for treatment. They advised her to relocate herself if she was so concerned, but she was also told again and again that the spray was "harmless".

The spraying programme over urban areas began in 1996, and was part of the MAF three major, million dollar campaigns to eradicate infiltrations of alien moths, specifically the white spotted moth, the painted apple moth, and the gypsy moth. The insecticide used in the campaigns was Foray 48B, a formulation which contained the bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis kurstaki* (BtK), and a number of adjuvant chemicals. As Foray 48B is based on a biological organism it was widely assumed to be safe by people, and the MAF had undertaken a massive publicity campaign to assure people that it was safe.

All these spray campaigns involved intensive aerial spraying of the insecticide over heavily populated urban areas. The duration of all the 3 campaigns were in excess of aerial spraying programmes anywhere in the world. The community of West Auckland where Sally lived had, by her count, experienced more than 56 aerial spray events which also occurred during school and working hours.

Justifiably upset by what was happening to her, Sally became even more upset when upon contacting MAF, Aer&rsquo;Aqua, seeing several specialists, and being shunted around when she called them up to complain, she was told that her symptoms were &ldquo;psycho-somatic&rdquo;.

These symptoms eventually included ever worsening asthma, diarrhoea, severe gripping pains in the abdomen and bloated stomach, bleeding from the bowels, and continuous fatigue. &ldquo;I felt like a walking zombie. I had no physical energy to do anything, and mentally I felt like I was in a constant haze. I kept losing my balance and often tripped over. I smashed my knee cap and had to have reconstructive surgery&rdquo;.

Wanting to know more about what was affecting her, the feisty 59 year old did some of her own research on Foray 48B at the time. This made her even angrier. As she told the Inquiry, &ldquo;I am angry at MAF and the New Zealand government for not doing their homework. The MAF press releases were lies! I got hold of a label and it states very clearly that there are hazards to humans and animals. My question is, why did MAF use this when it is clear that it can be dangerous?&rdquo;

Like so many hundreds in the affected community, she was subject to calls at between 4am to 4.30am in the morning, informing them that spraying was due to take place depending on the weather. She would then have to rush off within the hour or so, to be relocated in a &lsquo;safer&rsquo; zone, or face yet more devastating health effects. Having said this, she was often woken up on false alarms when spraying was postponed. During her submission to the Public Inquiry Sally, as did numerous others, elaborated on the trauma and indignity of being relocated from the solace of their homes to often unclean, noisy, depressing motels. Sally related that people less severely effected by the sprays were also, &ldquo;herded like cattle to &lsquo;breakfast areas&rsquo; where they had to stay cooped up from up to 6 to 8 hours per day, with nowhere for older people to rest, nowhere for babies to sleep, and screaming children running about due to sheer boredom&rdquo;.

Equally draining were the costs she incurred during the years when she had to be relocated and pay for her own medical expenses. When she was relocated she had to pay for all her phone calls to family, pay more in petrol costs to travel to and from work, and had numerous other expenses. &ldquo;But I was told to make the motel like my home! That I would have all my phone calls to family paid for, that I could have my family stay with me on occasion, and that the petrol costs for my travel to work would be covered. The only thing I would not be reimbursed for, was my food&rdquo;. But Sally got nothing!

The social costs of the debilitating effects of the sprays have been extremely high for Sally and many of the other survivors who bravely provided their testimonies to the Public Inquiry. When her ill health made it impossible for her to work, Sally was forced to quit her job and now lives on disability benefit. She had a partner, who subsequently left her because he could not cope with her health problems.

### Living in Another Country to Save Her Life

In September 2005 Sally made a trip to Australia to get away from the stress and ordeal of the sprays. But what she hoped was going to be a happy restful break turned into a nightmare. She suffered respiratory failure on board the plane, and spent 3 weeks in the intensive care unit with a tube down her larynx and breathing on a ventilator. The doctor who

treated her asked her how she got the 'chemical burns' on her lungs. Upon her return to New Zealand, she spent another three and a half months in rehabilitation, what Sally describes as 'recovering from a vegetative state';

More tragically, she was also advised to leave her homeland in order to save her own life. As she told the Inquiry, 'they told me I have one year; I have to leave New Zealand for a warmer climate. I have to move to Australia for my own survival';

Summing up the horrendous experiences she has survived, and the hopelessness she felt at the treatment she received from the authorities, she described the government's actions as 'cruelty!' 'They sprayed me without my consent!' she added, and regaled against their priorities, 'the government only cares about profits, not the people!';

In her earlier submission to the Prime Minister, Sally stated, 'I was proud to be a Kiwi but I'm not too sure now, as all this country is doing is killing us off one by one. When they are told of what effects this has on some people, they are not prepared to listen. They say this spray, Foray 48B (btK) is safe? If it is that safe, why do they tell us to wash down our barbecue's before we cook on them, wash our children's hands before they eat anything if they have been outside playing and not to put their fingers in their mouths, to close all our doors and windows, block off our fire places, seal up our windows, keep animals inside, and not to go outside for two hours after they have sprayed?';

When the problems first started, Sally got together with others suffering affects and started up a group called 'GASP'—Group Against Spraying'. She has become a tower of strength for many survivors who have often been too traumatised to re-live the pain and injustice they experienced. Apart from providing her own testimony during the Public Inquiry, Sally could be seen giving support to others, often simply by holding their hands.

Even if forced into exile, Sally made it clear that she was not running away from the fight, 'I'll swim back from Australia if I knew that they were going to spray people again!';

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