

# Banning of certain pesticides being discussed

## Background

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of June 2025, it was announced that Cabinet has approved the ban on the importation of the pesticide Terbufos. This follows the unacceptable and tragic death of six children in Soweto last year, after they ingested food contaminated with Terbufos. This may only be the start as ngo's have called for the immediate ban of all 194 highly hazardous pesticides currently registered in South Africa. These ngo's reject the notion of phase-out periods subject to industry discretion.

The SA Government appointed multi-disciplinary task teams to look into the deaths of the children. Terbufos is sold illegally and informally as a so-called 'street pesticide' for domestic use in townships and informal settlements to control rats. President Ramaphosa said in a statement on the matter on 24 November 2024 that: "The unregulated use of restricted pesticides in communities has become a growing problem, with devastating consequences. In many townships another chemical, Aldicarb, and an organophosphate known as Galephirimi are commonly sold by street vendors and hawkers to control rat infestations. Aldicarb has been banned for use in South Africa since 2016.... One of the reasons that people use pesticides is to deal with rat infestation. The problem of rat infestation is due in part to poor waste management in several municipalities. Rubbish is not collected regularly, streets are not being cleaned, creating conditions for rats and other pests to thrive. Often, the poorest communities are the worst affected, and often the cheapest remedies that are used are these highly hazardous substances like Terbufos and Aldicarb. Another challenge is that responsibility for environmental health that should happen in our communities is the responsibility of local government. Many municipalities do not have the capacity and resources to conduct inspections of these businesses and enforce regulations."

Dr Gerhard Verdoorn, a prominent expert in pesticides and pesticide use said that the Terbufos present in local communities have been imported from other countries. <sup>1</sup> Despite this, Cabinet has now decided to ban Terbufos and ngo's are lobbying Parliament to ban all highly hazardous chemicals from the country.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.primediaplus.com/terbufos-poisoning-closing-spaza-shops-only-treats-the-symptoms-not-the-cause-toxicologist/>

## **South African People's Tribunal on AgroToxins (SAPToA) presentation to Portfolio Committee on Agriculture**

On 20 May 2025 SAPToA briefed the Portfolio Committee on Agriculture on their findings regarding the impact of highly hazardous chemicals in agriculture. This grouping conducted public hearings in Stellenbosch and received testimonies from farm workers, trade unions, and health experts. They did not however invite any industry or farming groups to testify at these hearings. It appeared that the Department of Agriculture was also not invited to the hearings. The group claims amongst other things that widespread secrecy surrounding pesticide use in agriculture and that there is state collusion with industry. According to SAPToA farm workers have been exposed to harmful pesticides across generations and that highly hazardous pesticides (HHPs) carried significant risks, including cancers, birth defects, and environmental degradation.

### **Broader perspective**

The death of people because of exposure to pesticides is completely unacceptable, and the deaths of the children due to poisoning is absolutely tragic. Environmental degradation and health problems that can be linked to the use of highly hazardous pesticides should also concern all of us. However, it is important that all decisions taken should be based on fact and science and that a holistic approach be taken considering all the socio-economic, food security and health and environmental implications and weighing all available options.

A vital part of sustainably producing sufficient quantities of safe food is the ability to protect crops from devastating pests and diseases, minimise the impact of weeds on crops, and mediate certain responses in the crops to support growth and yield. Agricultural remedies, when used responsibly and in accordance with the label and the law, are critical tools in this pursuit.

Apart from the Fertilizers, Farm Feeds, Agricultural Remedies and Stock Remedies Act (Act No. 36 of 1947), South African agriculture operates under multiple layers of legislation beyond Act No. 36 of 1947. These include the Occupational Health and Safety Act (Act 85 of 1993) and the 2021 Regulations for Hazardous Chemical Agents. Environmental legislation in the form of the National Environmental Management Act (NEMA) (Act 107 of 1998) plays a crucial role in regulating pesticides, focusing on environmental protection and sustainable use.

It should be recognised that Terbufos for example, is a highly effective pesticide that is widely used on many different crops. It is used in combatting pests that plague potatoes, beans, grains, fruit and vegetables. Alternatives are not readily available or viable in terms of efficacy, cost, residue management etc in all instances. In many cases alternatives are also considered to be highly hazardous.

A direct comparison between what products that are authorised for use in South Africa versus other countries is also not a fair comparison. Climatic conditions, agronomic practices, pest composition and even crop types are not exactly the same in South Africa versus Europe for example. A controlled phase-out of older

agricultural remedies, with the concurrent introduction of new technologies that are less hazardous to people and the environment, is already underway in South Africa.

It also needs to be recognised that banning a product will not necessarily solve the problem of illegal use and accidental poisoning. Despite being banned in South Africa in 2016, another illegal street poison aldicarb is still available at taxi ranks and street vendors in our country.

## **Conclusion**

Crop protection is a vital tool that farmers require in order to protect the crops that ultimately become our food or drink, feed for livestock or fibre. We have a responsible industry, that is very focussed on sustainability. We also have a comprehensive regulatory framework.

Agriculture is long term business. Sustainability lies at the heart of every farming operation and is embedded across the agricultural value chain. Responsible pesticide use is very much part and parcel of sustainability. The agricultural industry wants to be part of the solution in coming up with less harmful crop protection methods and remedies, but this will not happen overnight. A science-based holistic approach is required.

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