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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

F. B. THOMPSON

DURING the last twelve months, several incidents which made headline news in the daily newspapers were of considerable interest to our members. I refer to the death of trout in a stream as a result of dieldrin being spilt on the aerodrome at Taieri in September, to the extensive hormone damage to vineyards in the Te Kauwhata district in November, and to a judgement of the Supreme Court in Hamilton in December which awarded over £3,000 to a market gardener for damages caused by hormones.

Although each of these incidents received considerable publicity, it should not be inferred that they are the only cases of damage resulting from accidental or careless use of agricultural chemicals. Unfortunately, each year there are a number of reports of hormone damage to vineyards and market gardens. Still more unfortunate is the fact that often the damage is extensive. Over the last three seasons, the average total damage in cases which have been reported is more than £10,000 per annum. In most cases the damage is due to carelessness or ignorance on the part of those responsible for the application of the chemicals. Apart from the direct inconvenience and monetary loss to the growers whose crops are affected, a regrettable consequence of such incidents is that they tend to undermine public confidence in the use of agricultural chemicals as a safe and satisfactory method of controlling weeds and insects. These incidents also tend to give weight to the arguments of the vociferous groups which maintain that the increasing use of agricultural chemicals is a menace.

This is a matter of concern to us both as an organization and as individuals. We believe that chemicals play a very large part in helping our horticultural and agricultural producers to deal with pest problems with which they are concerned. We also believe that without the use of chemicals we would not be able to maintain the present rate of production. This is most important at this particular stage because our agricultural leaders are concerned that the increase in production over the last few years has been inadequate. If production is to be increased, all losses due to pests have to be reduced to a minimum.

The remarks of the President of the New Zealand Vegetable and Produce Growers Federation in his address to the recent Annual Conference of the Federation are relevant to

the present argument although he was referring to restrictions designed to reduce chemical residues in vegetables. The President said:

Producers are constantly fighting the ravages of pest and disease which are becoming increasingly more difficult to control. If our most modern and effective weapon is banned or unduly restricted, our production costs are bound to soar and consumer prices will ultimately follow suit. The use of these chemicals is probably saving the housewife of New Zealand several million pounds per year.

A regrettable feature is that the damage to crops through careless use of chemicals is so unnecessary. Experienced farmers and contractors have proved that they can safely use weedkillers adjacent to vineyards and market gardens without causing damage. Their experience confirms the claims that some of us have made at various times that these materials are safe if properly used. We consider that the qualification "if properly used" is not unreasonable. Many other things, such as motorcars, which are accepted as necessities of modern life, are lethal if not properly used. Therefore it would be illogical to condemn the use of chemicals because a few examples of improper use or handling have resulted in considerable damage.

The question arises as to what can be done to reduce to a minimum the misuse of these chemicals. It appears that there is a need for still more publicity and education. As far as possible it should be directed to the people who are likely to be responsible for the spraying of chemicals near vineyards and market gardens. As an organization, we can perhaps give some thought to the suggestion that the programmes for our summer weed courses should include talks and discussions on the prevention of damage. As individuals, we should give our active support to any campaign to make users of agricultural chemicals more conscious of their responsibility when spraying near susceptible crops.

If publicity and educational campaigns are not effective in reducing the damage caused, the question will arise as to what further action should be taken.