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# The prolonged effort to ban paraquat in Thailand: The Toxic Substances Board Won't Act

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Efforts to push the ban on the use of three types of dangerous chemicals, including paraquat, chlorpyrifos and glyphosate, lasted for almost two years. Finally, there was progress on February 14, 2019, at the meeting of the Hazardous Substances Committee, which voted 16 to 5 to not yet stopped the use of such chemicals. The result has disappointed the public, academics and health networks across the country

Thailand is an agricultural country that embraced agricultural pesticides and chemical fertilizers ever since the Green Revolution era and has even intensified its use of pesticides these days. Thailand does not produce the pesticides itself, especially the active ingredient in pesticides and, therefore, it must import its entire supply. In 2017, imports of pesticides or agricultural hazardous substances amounted to 197,647 tons, while only 75,473 tons were imported in 2005.<sup>1</sup> This means that Thailand's import of pesticides increased 2.6 times in 12 years. A survey by the network of pesticides watch (Thai-PAN) found that, among imported pesticides used in Thailand, more than 150 types are Highly Hazardous Pesticides (HHPs) according to the JMPM criteria (FAO/WHO Joint Meeting Pesticide Management) or the Working Group between the UN's FAO and WHO for the

management of pesticides. This article summarizes the situation of the use of three types of pesticides, paraquat, glyphosate and chlorpyrifos, which many advocates are trying to ban the use of in Thailand. This chapter also reviews policy on the use of such chemicals in other countries, and describes the fight to push for change of government policy by joining forces of the public sector farmers group, academics and the Thai Health Network

## Pesticide use situation in Thailand

Three types of pesticides: paraquat, glyphosate and chlorpyrifos, which many groups in Thailand are lobbying for a genuine ban on use of, are also considered Highly Hazardous Pesticides. In 2017, Thailand imported 267 types of pesticides as follows: paraquat – 44.50 million

kilograms, glyphosate -- 59.85 million kilograms, and chlorpyrifos -- 3.32 million kilograms. These three account for 54.5% of the total import volume of pesticides.

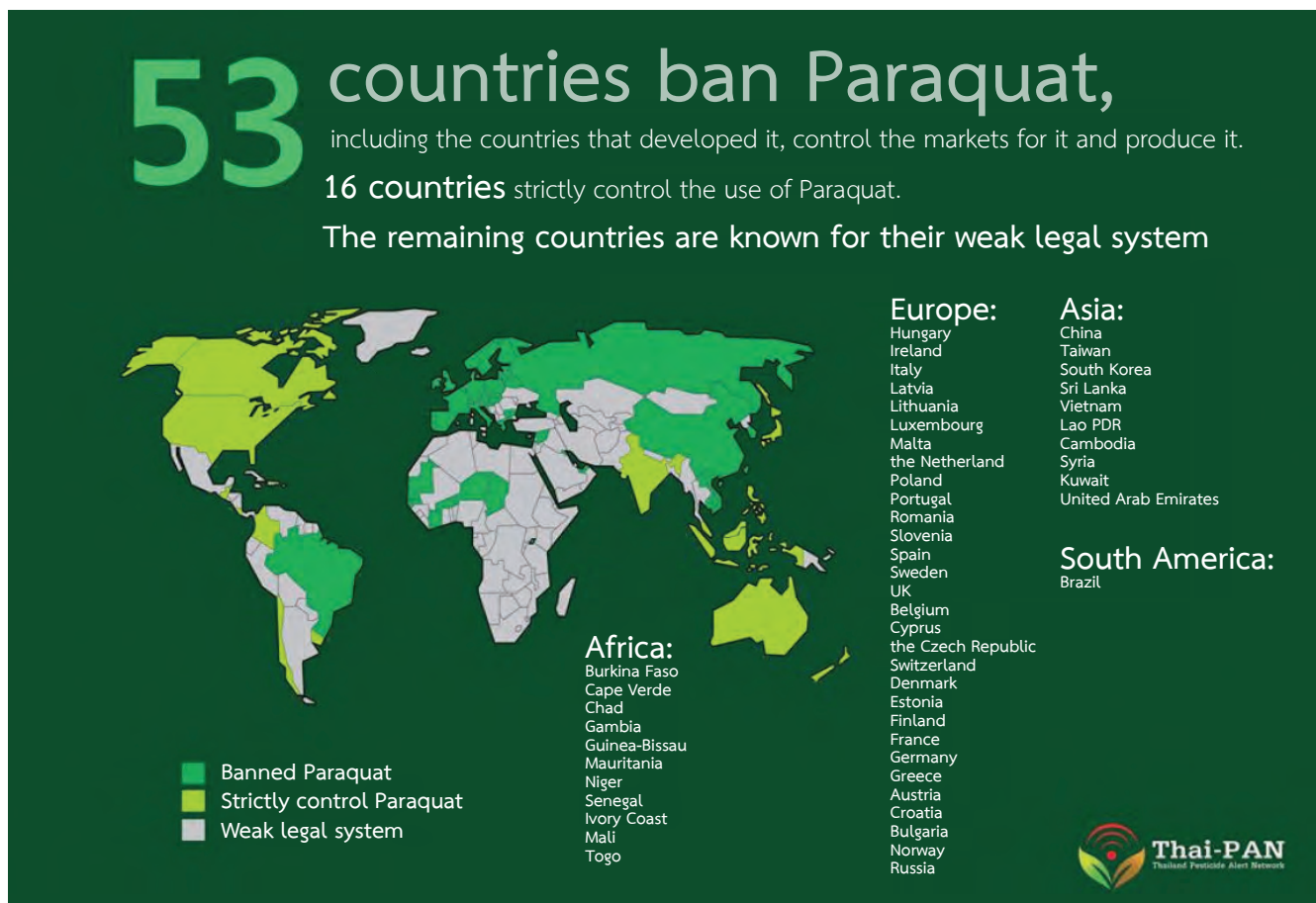
In Thailand, paraquat is known by its trade name "Grammoxone", a combustion herbicide. It is widely used because it efficiently makes the green part of the weed plant wither. It is a fast-acting chemical which causes weeds to dry and die within 1-2 hours without destroying the root system of the cash crop. But its adverse effects on human health have been clearly documented, such as the following:<sup>2</sup>

- (1) It is highly toxic to humans
- (2) It is a cause of Parkinson's disease and adversely affects the nervous system
- (3) It is a contributing factor causing necrotic disease
- (4) It is a substance that is too toxic to be used safely even with good protection
- (5) Once it enters a pregnant woman's body, it can be passed on from mother to fetus
- (6) Paraquat contaminants are dispersing in the environment and have entered the food chain

## Paraquat is banned in more than 50 countries

There are currently 53 countries around the world that have banned the use of paraquat, including European Union countries. In 2007, the European Court ordered the ban of paraquat due to health concerns and chemical safety assessments. In Asia, paraquat is banned in ten countries.<sup>3</sup>

The research of Asst. Prof. Dr. Noppadon Kitana, Department of Biology, Faculty of Science, Chulalongkorn University, found traces of paraquat in frogs, crabs, and shellfish. Despite being a herbicide-focused substance, it is clearly being absorbed by animals. Data from Nan Province has documented paraquat contamination in the amount of 24 - 56 micrograms per kilogram in field crabs, and 12.6 - 1,233.8 micrograms per kilogram in frogs (compared to a standard limit of not more than 5 micrograms per kilogram).<sup>4</sup> However, the agro-industry protested these findings, and argued that use of paraquat was still necessary to help farmers reduce cash crop production costs.



Thai-PAN

## The beginning of the battle to ban paraquat in Thailand

The first round of the battle to ban paraquat began when the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) increased its attention to safe food consumption and found problems affecting farmers' health and population at risk of exposure to toxic substances. Accordingly, the government appointed a committee in December 2016 to address the problem of high-risk pesticides and prevention of adverse effects. This was a joint committee between the MOPH, the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, the Ministry of Industry, the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment, and representatives from academia and the public. After compiling evidence and information from relevant agencies, Thailand passed a resolution on April 5, 2017 to ban the use of paraquat and chlorpyrifos, with a deadline to end all imports of these pesticides by December 2018. The target date for ending all use was set as December 2019. Two weeks after this announcement, the National Farmers Council (the legal entity which represents Thai farmers) endorsed the proposed import ban of paraquat, chlorpyrifos, and glyphosate, and appealed to the Ministry of Agriculture to expedite finding a replacement to protect the health of farmers and consumers.

The Department of Agriculture compiled academic data to redraw conclusions despite having representatives in the committee, and concluded on September 12, 2017 that it agreed with the restriction of use of glyphosate. However, the Department could not draw conclusions on the adverse health effects of paraquat and chlorpyrifos



<https://www.posttoday.com/economy/554472>

since it claimed to lack the medical expertise to make a judgment. Therefore, the Department proposed that the Hazardous Substances Committee advise on the issue of the effects of these two pesticides on human health.

In the meantime, the public sector mobilized the formation of “The Network to Ban Deadly Toxins” to support the resolution of the committee on the issue of high-risk pesticides. Furthermore, when the MOPH saw that registration licenses of paraquat and chlorpyrifos were about to expire, it submitted a letter to the Prime Minister, co-signed by 50 provincial governors, calling on the Department of Agriculture to not extend the paraquat and chlorpyrifos registrations and allow the Hazardous Substances Committee to consider banning these toxic substances at once. Unexpectedly, in November 2017, the Department of Agriculture extended paraquat registration for the Syngenta Co., Elefante Co., and Dow Agro-Science Co. for six years, dating from October 2017. The Department granted this extension without waiting for the results of the decision of the Hazardous Substances Committee, citing the reason that, if they delayed the extension of the registration, the private sector will be damaged and may sue the state.

The renewal of the licenses for such hazardous chemicals caused a stream of criticisms. The objections were so loud that the Office of the National Health Commission condemned and announced its disagreement with the extension of the paraquat and chlorpyrifos registrations by the Department of Agriculture. In addition, the Federation of Consumer Organizations submitted a letter to the Human Rights Commission to investigate human rights violations in the case of the extension of the paraquat registration without waiting for the consideration of the Hazardous Substances Committee.

## Various organizations unite to support the ban of paraquat

On December 7, 2017, the Hazardous Substances Committee appointed a Special Sub-Committee to consider the control of paraquat, chlorpyrifos and glyphosate. For its part, the Network to Ban Deadly Toxins was closely following this issue and submitted a letter demanding the Hazardous Substances Committee use independent academic information to make its

determination, and avoid any conflict of interest. The Network wanted to make sure that no committee members who are stakeholders are involved in the consideration, and that deliberations of the Committee be made public.

In January 2018, the Prime Minister directed the MOPH be the lead together with other relevant agencies to study the information and the impact of paraquat and report this matter to the Cabinet as soon as possible. On February 15, 2018, the MOPH convened a meeting with the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives and the Ministry of Industry on paraquat to review the impact of using this pesticide. The meeting confirmed the resolution of the Committee on High-risk Pesticides and the initial resolution to ban use by December, 2019. On February 22, 2018, the Public Health Commission of the National Legislative Assembly (NLA) announced the results of the deliberations and passed a resolution to immediately implement the resolution of the Committee to ban imports of the pesticides from June 2018 since it was revealed that imports of these three pesticides had actually increased significantly in 2017 compared to previous years.

In addition, the National Reform Plan for Natural Resources and the Environment was announced in the Royal Gazette on April 6, 2018, citing Sub-issue 1.9 Reducing/abolishing the use of chemicals for agriculture that affect people's health and environmental quality. This announcement focused on prohibiting or limiting the use of chemicals, especially paraquat, by using scientific evidence that indicates the threat to human health, and accelerating the development of various substitutes and alternatives to using bio-active substances

In the meantime the anti-corruption organization "ACT" conducted a poll and found that paraquat is one of the issues that people are most interested in. Therefore, a public forum was convened on "Corruption in the agricultural sector part I: Paraquat?" Since then, there have been a series of academic forums to provide information to the public, such as on May 16, 2018, on the topic of "Academic Facts on Controlling Hazardous Chemicals: Paraquat, Glyphosides and Chlorpyrifos." This latest forum called for the Hazardous Substances Committee to consider a ban of these three pesticides



by using scientific facts. The organizers of the forum was to submit academic evidence to the Hazardous Substances Committee for their consideration to ban these chemicals according to the resolution of the NLA Health Commission.<sup>5</sup>

### The Hazardous Substances Committee resisting against banning paraquat

Even though various agencies, administrative, legislative and civil society networks have agreed with the need to abolish paraquat, chlorpyrifos and glyphosates, at the meeting of the Hazardous Substances Commission, on May 23, 2018, the Committee passed a resolution of "No ban" on the use of these three pesticides. The Committee claimed that the environmental and health impact data were not sufficient. However, after the Committee meeting, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Jiraporn Limpananon Executive Director of the Ministry of Defense and member of the Committee, issued a personal statement describing the process of voting as follows: "Before voting, I mentioned Section 12, paragraph 2 of the Hazardous Substances Act, which states that 'The decision of the meeting to hold a majority ... Any director who has a personal interest in any matter being considered, that director does not have a right to vote on that matter.' It appeared that not a single member of the committee wanted to waive their right to vote." This example provides an indication of the inability of the Hazardous Substance Committee to issue resolutions based on scientific data.

This inaction led to the movement of the Network to Ban Use of Deadly Toxins, whose members include 686 organizations. The Network mobilized its members to gather in front of Government House on June 5, 2018

to submit a letter to the Prime Minister through the Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives to more carefully monitor the process of considerations of the Hazardous Substances Committee and the work of the Special Subcommittee as follows:

(1) Appointment of the Special Subcommittee to Consider Hazardous Substances Control Has chosen representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives and former officials of the Ministry of Agriculture, numbering up to four persons, and four persons support the Ministry of Agriculture, as members on the committee of 12 persons. None of the members is an expert in health effects.

(2) The Special Sub-Committee is relying on information that is obsolete to support the continued use of toxic substances, and is ignoring the empirical data and many new reports on the harmful effects of these pesticides. The network of scholars from many institutions, such as Chulabhorn Research Institute, Chulalongkorn University, Mahidol University and Naresuan University have stepped up to provide a platform for academic facts to be used as the basis for decisions.

(3) The members at the meeting of the Hazardous Substances Committee on May 23, 2018 had at least three directors who have interests with the Pesticide Trade Association. But they did not recuse themselves from the vote on the proposed ban of the three pesticides. That inaction may conflict with the Hazardous Substance Act BE 2535, Section 12, paragraph 2.

Accordingly, there was a call on the Hazardous Substances Committee to review the resolution and consider banning paraquat and chlorpyrifos as of December 2019 according to the time frame proposed by the MOPH, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives to find alternative pesticides which pose less or no health risks. This is in accordance with the resolution of the National Farmers Council.

### **The Ombudsman called for the ban of Paraquat within one year, but the Hazardous Substances Commission continues to prolong its use**

The demonstration by the Network in front of Government House led to the Ombudsman to examine

this issue and on 23 November 2018, proposed a ban on the use of paraquat within one year. During the interim, there should be increasing restriction of use of this pesticide, and promotion of awareness with the public, including identification of a replacement. This process should be completed within 120 days after receiving the documentation and to develop biopharmaceuticals or find other safer methods, to be completed within 180 days after issuing of this announcement. This led the Hazardous Substances Committee to reconsider a ban of paraquat based on the Ombudsman's decision. **However, on February 14, 2019, the Committee voted 16 to 5 not to endorse a ban.** This conclusion confirms the Committee resolution in May 2018 – not restricting the import and use of these three dangerous agricultural chemicals – based on the reason that there is not yet alternative pesticide or replacement measures at present. In the meantime, the Department of Agriculture will continue to try to find alternatives. It is expected that, in the next two years, these three pesticides will actually be banned nationwide.<sup>6</sup> However, some government agencies are not waiting and have ordered the elimination of use of these chemicals. For example, the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Varieties has issued a prohibition on the use of paraquat, glyphosate and chlorpyrifos in the national parks area to protect the national park natural resources and environment and the watershed areas as well as the health of the people. As for the National Human Rights Commission, the Thai Pharmacy Council and the Thai Medical Council, they have proposed to consider prohibition of use of all three substances as well. During the final development before the February 14, 2019 meeting of the Hazardous Substances Commission, groups opposing and favoring use of paraquat competed for advocacy influence. There was also some underhanded shuffling of staff of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives. For example, on February 12, 2019. Mr. Krisada Bunrach, Minister of Agriculture and Cooperative convened a meeting of high-ranking government officials to announce that the Ministry does not support the use of toxic substances that harm human health. In addition, he announced that the Ministry of Agriculture has introduced measures to



reduce the use of paraquat under consultation with the Hazardous Substances Committee and ordered that all 5 director-general – who are members of Hazardous Substances Commission – attend the meeting themselves. However, in the end, the documents that the Ministry of Agriculture executives used to consider for its decision is only a proposal to limit use of the three pesticides following 5 ministry announcements which would be implemented. Decision to ban the pesticides will be reconsidered again in 2 year time.

Despite the undesirable resolution of the Hazardous Substances Commission in on February 14, 2019, the relevant networks such as Thai-PAN have resolved to move forward in order to abolish paraquat and other hazardous toxins by encouraging the Ombudsman to take up this matter with the National Anti-Corruption Commission to file a law suit to the Administrative Court. The attempt is extended to promoting the ban of goods and services from producers and others who support the use of these hazardous substances as well. In addition, this advocacy is in opposition to the situation in which corporate interests of agro-industry are, by de facto, administering the country instead of the relevant government agencies – a situation that must be rectified.

## Conclusion

Three types of pesticides, paraquat, glyphosides and chlorpyrifos, adversely affect human health, animals and the environment. At present, at least 53 countries around the world have abolished the use of paraquat. Thus, many groups have joined together to propose a ban on the use of these dangerous chemicals in Thailand as well. But those demands are being opposed by the chemical business sector, parts of the agricultural sector and some government agencies, with the argument that these pesticides reduce production costs of farmers. However, this is only an economic argument for the use of these toxins. The fact that it has been so difficult to achieve a ban on these pesticides reflects the hideousness of hazardous substance law which allow decision making power on the ban of these pesticides on the hands of agencies who do not have the adequate knowledge and awareness of health and environmental impact, not to mention the conflict of interest among some committee members. Thai society needs to use the knowledge and power of the people to uproot this issue and bring about changes.

