



## **Chlordecone: chronicle of a risky management of a recognized hazard**

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The recent publication of INRA's report on the [\*Saga of chlordecone in the French West Indies\*](#) blows the final whistle for the holidays which – like their plethora of easy reading – are now gone with the wind. Is another health crisis forthcoming, suspected or revealed? Not at all. It is not a discovery strictly speaking, the public authorities having finally responded to manage the threat the pesticide poses for human health (both for farms workers and customers) as well as for the environment (see, particularly, the point 4 in [\*National Plan Health and Environment 2004-2008\*](#), or more precisely, the [\*Chlordecone action plan in Martinique and Guadeloupe 2008-2010\*](#)). The point of the document lies somewhere else, which the author, P.B. Joly, is fully aware of: tracing back the history of chlordecone and its use in the West Indies banana plantations is meant to illustrate the “characteristics of a risks management regime”. Unwinding the chronological thread of the subject, the report gives a complete review of the actors and interests -- sometimes antagonistic -- at stake, and identifies the knots in the crisis, or at least the risks, management. The work could consequently be used as a model if yesterday's mistakes and carelessness are not to be repeated tomorrow.

Chlordecone is ranked among the human-made chemical compounds resulting from much research and experimentation, particularly aiming at eradicating a pest population and ensuring an outmost productivity of fruits and vegetables, the impact of this work exploitation on human health and the environment not always being measured. Released from a U.S. laboratory in 1950 and patented two years later, the pesticide was to fight banana trees' cockroaches and weevils. The danger is now known: the [\*Chlordecone action plan\*](#) clearly names it as a “*persistent organic polluting organochlorinated pesticide, able to concentrate in living organisms, possibly carcinogenic and a potential endocrine disruptor in humans*”.

However, chlordecone had been commercialized before it was definitely banned in the USA in 1976 because of its ability to add up in the environment and after being registered on the list of the potentially carcinogenic agents.

The report shows that the French state stand would be more qualified and its response would come later, the economic importance of the banana crop in the West Indies playing on this point a braking role. Two approval requests had been rejected by the Toxics Commission in the late sixties, on grounds of the compound toxicity and its known persistence in the environment. The stand would however not be preserved since, in 1972, the same authority would judge that chlordecone “*would be interesting to treat banana plantations as a substitute for HCH*” (a pesticide with a decreasing efficiency due to insects’ resistance) and “*residues in banana pulp go unnoticed*”. A temporary selling authorization would then be delivered. “*The arguments on chlordecone usefulness to fight weevils got the better of the reluctance linked to its high toxicity*” the report concludes.

### ***Chlordecone, a magic project?***

One of the flaws spotted by the report concerns the too little collaboration between researchers, the lack of scientific information communication or the unbelievable indifference of France to the scandal which broke out in the USA in 1975 in the company making the magic product : following the apparition of neurological troubles affecting employees and a recognized pollution of the neighbouring waters, the concerned American agency banned the production, sale and use on grounds of risks which “*could not reasonably be accepted*”. The manufacturer would be heavily fined – the first time ever on this side of the Atlantic in the field of environmental damages.

In spite of an over-mediatisation of this episode, in France nothing changed. Conversely, the use of the product would be authorized in 1981 and nearly 180 tones would be poured in plantations from 1982 to 1993. “*One may wonder why the people economically responsible for this matter (...) were informed neither of the incident nor of everything that was learned on this molecule at that time.*” the report author underscores, all the more so since the USA specially prohibited the importation of banana because of chlordecone residues...Finally and unexplainably the two French researchers reports would mention neither these events nor the

scientific articles published in international journals. Did an element change the situation? Indeed, in the meantime, the compound that could be used was not chlordecone but curlone, five percent of which being... chlordecone. Still, it remains “*surprising and puzzling*” that the French authorities ignored the warnings coming from the USA and even some data showing the compound persistence in West Indies farmlands.

To this withdrawal attitude can be added the sluggishness of the administration which prevented the ban on the product – eventually decided in 1990- from taking effect immediately. Indeed “*lobbying is being conducted to keep on using the pesticide until satisfying alternatives are found*”. Wishing to find a compromising solution, the agriculture department recalled that “*when a specificity is subjected to a ratification withdrawal, the sale must stop within a year and the use within two years*”. Thanks to a year dispensation granted by the agriculture secretary, chlordecone could then be used until 1993. On this subject P.B. Joly thinks that “*the lack of alternatives is not a fate but the result of consented efforts. Other chemical solutions could thus be thought of and the combination of several chemical strategies may have led to a better compromise between economic efficiency and environment preservation. But one may also think of sustainable ways to fight weevils which will be developed within acceptable time after the end of chlordecone use. By rewarding the status quo, the latitudinarian character of the legal system of that time did certainly not correctly entice all the implied actors.*”

Finally the report reveals the existence of “*light signals*” supposedly common to both health and environmental crises : on the one hand the fact that “*information given to actors in charge of this file could have ( or should have) led to earlier decisions*” and that “*some actors gave the alarm but have not been heard*”, on the other hand the ambiguous role of the norm and “*what is considered to be normal at the time when the action takes place – the norm (or standards of judgement) is partly written in the law but cannot be limited to this law or other rules; the building of the norm refers to a set of elements ranging from what can be called morals to technical measures*”.

Denouncing “*real abnormalities in a warning approach*”, Joly’s report is a true illustration of the need to work with all researchers across subjects and to collaborate with industrials,

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farmers and administration: constraints and values that Lascaux is set on advocating and promoting.

