

# Pulp Non-Fiction

AFTER 28 YEARS OF CONTINUOUS publication, *The Ecologist*, England's leading environmental magazine, is having a tough time finding its audience.

Perhaps that has something to do with the subject matter of the current issue: Monsanto and genetic engineering.

Penwell, a small Cornwall-based company that has printed *The Ecologist* for the past 26 years, decided late last month to shred all 14,000 copies of the September/October 1998 special Monsanto issue.

England's stringent libel laws apply not only to publishers but to printers as well.

After the pulping of the Monsanto issue, the editors of *The Ecologist* then found another printer who printed a second run of 16,000 copies. But now, the U.K.'s two major retailers are refusing to carry the magazine on newsstands.

The Monsanto issue carries tough attacks on the St. Louis-based biotech giant, including reviews of its links to major corporate disasters involving Agent Orange, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), genetically engineered bovine growth hormone (rBGH), Round-Up herbicide and the terminator seed. (Plants from this seed yield sterile seeds. That way, farmers can't save the seed for the next planting season — they have to go back to Monsanto and buy more seed.)

Also included in the magazine is a broadside against genetically engineered foods written by the Prince of Wales.

Monsanto says it had nothing to do with the shredding of the magazine or with the fact that big retailers are refusing to carry it. Monsanto says it did not contact the printer prior to the pulping of the issue and that it has not contacted the retailers.

Yet, it is clear that Monsanto could not have been pleased with the current issue of magazine.

After sending the issue to the printer in September, Zac Goldsmith, co-editor of the magazine, received a tele-

phone call from Penwell.

"They were having doubts about whether or not they should release it," Goldsmith said in an interview from his office in London. "I pointed out to them that not only have we been with them for 26 years, but there had never been any conflict of any sort at all prior to this issue. I asked, 'Have you been approached by Monsanto?' They said, 'No.'"

Reached at his office in Cornwall, Mike Ford, Penwell's commercial director, said there was an article in the issue "that might have been libelous."

When asked how he found out the article might have been libelous, Ford says, "I'm not saying."

"You are not going to get me to say anything on that," Ford says. "We were a bit worried about it and we checked it out with barristers in London. They read through it and advised us not to distribute them."

Ford says he did not know whether the lawyers Penwell consulted had any contact with Monsanto.

Ford says that *The Ecologist* represented 2 percent of Penwell's business. Ford said the magazine spent about 40,000 pounds a year with Penwell and Penwell is a 2 million pound a year business.

Goldsmith says that Monsanto was tipped off that *The Ecologist* was focusing on Monsanto and genetic engineering.

"About two weeks before we went to the printers, I got a call from Monsanto's public relations man, Dan Verakis," Goldsmith says. "He is Monsanto's man in the UK. He called me and wanted to know whether we were doing an issue on Monsanto. He wanted to point out their frustration as a company that we hadn't consulted them."

Goldsmith believes that Monsanto contacted the printer before the printer decided to pulp the issue. "I'm quite sure of it, but I have to take the printer's word for it," he says. "I have no evidence to support this. If they weren't contacted by Monsanto, then that is even more scary. This company,

through reputation alone, has managed to bring about what is, as far as we are concerned, de facto censorship."

On Sunday September 27, the printer told Goldsmith that the issue is going to be destroyed. On Tuesday September 29, the *Guardian* newspaper ran an article reporting that the issue had been destroyed. But in fact, it hadn't yet been destroyed, according to Goldsmith.

"In fact, they hadn't pulped it," Goldsmith relates. "They called me up on Tuesday September 29 and said, 'We don't want to break our ties with you. We will send it out if we can arrange a guarantee from Monsanto that should the issue be considered libelous, they would not sue the printers, and go only against *The Ecologist*.'"

But Monsanto rejected the offer. And the issue was pulped.

Goldsmith then went out to find another printer. He approached a printer named Formations, which promptly printed 16,000 copies. *The Ecologist* then mailed the issue to its list.

Monsanto's Dan Verakis denies talking with the printer about the issue, although he knew about the issue from talking with Goldsmith two weeks before it went to the printer.

"I told Goldsmith that we would be perfectly happy to respond to questions or to offer comments about biotechnology if they were covering it," Verakis says from his office in London.

He admits that it seems strange for a printer to destroy copies of the magazine and he has no explanation for why it happened.

"Consider this," Verakis says. "We are being accused of putting pressure on a printer in an effort to stop publication of his magazine. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense for us to try to pressure a printer into not printing a particular magazine when that magazine has their issue on computer disks and can take it to any printer on earth for production."

"I can assure you, we have not put any pressure on a printer," Verakis says. "And what printer would listen to Monsanto on this when the paper has been a client for 27 some years?"

When reminded that large corpora-

tions and their lawyers often send threatening letters to even the smallest of publications in the United States and that it is tougher for smaller publications in Britain because of the more stringent libel laws there, Verakis professed ignorance.

"I didn't know that there was more leverage here," Verakis says.

When asked whether he had read the current issue of *The Ecologist*, Verakis says, "I thumbed through it quickly when I received it."

"There were some interesting views," he says. "I was disappointed that they didn't contact us for comment about some of the issues they raised. I don't think it was fair. They have taken their critical opinion and they are entitled to that. I'm sure we could point out some things in there that weren't exactly true."

When asked to give examples of things in the issue that weren't exactly true, Verakis said he would call back with examples. He called back the next morning.

"I picked it up this morning and read through the story on (the herbicide) Roundup," Verakis said. "I didn't get past the first paragraph without finding some mistakes. They say that Monsanto and its subsidiaries hold the patents on half of the 36 genetically engineered whole foods being marketed in the U.S. The fact is we only have patents in corn, cotton, soybeans and potatoes in the United States. That's four whole foods."

In the same paragraph, the author of the story, Joseph Medelson, says that "Monsanto is a major producer of agricultural chemicals, and is using genetic engineering to dramatically increase, not decrease, the use of herbicides on crops."

Verakis says that Monsanto's studies of Roundup Ready products show a dramatic reduction in the use of chemicals.

When asked whether Monsanto is contemplating legal action against *The Ecologist*, Verakis says, "At this time, no."  
— Russell Mokhiber

(RFE/RL) began reporting regularly on the accident via the Internet.

Cameco — which as part of KOC failed to inform downstream communities of the accident until as many as five hours after it occurred, when the company discovered that the cyanide had leaked from the trucks — reacted bitterly and defensively. In a news release, the Canadian company stated that while the accident was regrettable, there was no scientifically credible evidence connecting any of the reported deaths in downstream villages with cyanide. Dismissively, the company stated that cyanide "occurs naturally in most stone fruits."

In a June 22, 1998 letter to several of the finance institutions backing the joint venture, KOC President Len Homeniuk attempted to discount the growing reaction to the spill, describing it as "media sensationalism, political opportunism and medical misstatement."

But a report on the spill by the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation concluded that at least one death was causally related to the cyanide spill. And a physician on duty at the Barskoon hospital said that Kyrgyz governmental authorities told her to stop reporting cyanide-related deaths after the fourth was reported.

Company officials argue that cyanide dissipates rapidly into the environment, suggesting that skin rashes, sores and other ailments reported days and weeks after the accident could therefore not be attributable to the spill. But the U.S. Mineral Policy Center (MPC), in a recent report, "Cyanide Uncertainties," documents the substantial uncertainty surrounding the long-term effects of many forms of cyanide.

Moreover, it was later learned that either the company or the Kyrgyz government, or both, applied a heavy dose of calcium hypochloride at the site soon after the spill, in an apparent attempt to neutralize the cyanide. Calcium hypochloride is more persistent in the environment and may have contributed to the ongoing health ailments.

Kyrgyz human rights and environmental groups point out that KOC's

## Kyrgyz Uprising

FOLLOWING A MINE COMPANY CYANIDE SPILL and industry and government recalcitrance in acknowledging the human health threat, residents of two Kyrgyz towns in July reportedly blockaded a road to stop mine trucks and held the mine company's president hostage.

The residents' rage was triggered on May 20, 1998, when a transport truck carrying 20 tons of sodium cyanide crashed through a bridge railing high in the mountains of the remote Central Asian country of Kyrgystan. The truck, which was part of a convoy delivering toxic chemicals for use at the Kumtor mine, one of the 10 largest gold mines in the world, plunged deep into the sparkling Barskoon River below. Packages carrying almost two tons of cyanide ruptured and spilled into the river, which is used by downstream communities for irrigation and potable water.

Varying news accounts reported that as many as four people died in

connection with the spill, 2,500 were possibly poisoned, 800 were hospitalized, and as many as 5,000 residents of downstream villages evacuated.

The largest foreign investment project in the former Soviet Republic, the Kumtor mine is operated by the Kumtor Operating Company (KOC), a joint venture two-thirds owned by the Kyrgyz state gold company Kyrgyzaltyn, and one third by the Cameco Corporation of Canada. KOC is backed by Chase Manhattan Bank and a plethora of taxpayer-supported financial institutions, including the World Bank Group's International Finance Corporation (IFC) and Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the U.S. Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) and the Canadian Export Development Corporation (CEDC).

Soon after the spill, the U.S. government-supported Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Newline

denials of harm were not accompanied by any significant efforts to improve the safety of mine operations. "The company has failed to produce any credible information on the emergency response plan or on several environmental accidents that they have been charged with," says Natalia Ablova, director of the Bishkek-based Bureau on Human Rights and Rule of Law. "Instead, they have launched a very aggressive media campaign and outrightly promoted 'show' visits of different delegations to the site." RFE/RL also reported over the summer that KOC had sponsored several cultural and sporting events in the Issyk-Kul area in an apparent attempt to convince local people that the lake was not contaminated.

With frustration mounting, local villagers took matters into their own hands. Between July 10 and July 12, residents of villages of Barskoon and Tosor reportedly blockaded a road to the Kumtor mine, demanding that the government's contract with the mining companies be cancelled. KOC President Homeniuk was reportedly held hostage by local residents for about an hour, but was eventually released under the condition that he return for a more productive discussion.

On July 11, 1998, a working group organized by the citizen's group Interbilim issued a news release describing the uprising. "To this day the sick people have no information about what patients should do, who can help them, saying nothing of legal support," the statement says.

"Obviously, the command was given from the government officials to the medical personnel not to make a diagnosis of cyanide, chlorcyan and phosphene poisonings. Pregnant women are persuaded to make 'voluntary' abortions. The doctors make other diagnoses for the sick people, like allergic symptoms or mosquito bites. We have seen people in the streets, who had numerous ulcers on their bodies and they did not get any medical aid."

Soon after the local Barskoon and Tosor protest, the Kyrgyz parliament formed a commission to assess the cause and damage of the accident. On July 23, the commission recommended

that: parties responsible for the accident be punished; an independent laboratory be established in the Barskoon valley to monitor the aftermath of the accident; and the Kumtor mine be closed until a gold refining factory and waste depository at the mine site is approved, the Bakykchy-Kumtor road is repaired thoroughly and a sodium cyanide synthesizing factory is built at the mine site.

These recommendations followed RFE/RL reports earlier in July that the Kyrgyz Ministry of National Security opened criminal cases against a truck driver and two managers of KOC for their alleged role in the accident and subsequent failure to inform downstream communities. Kyrgyzstan's criminal code calls for up to 20 years imprisonment for those found guilty of many ecological crimes, including the poisoning of water resources. Some environmental groups have suggested that higher authorities in the company and within finance institutions such as IFC, should also face charges.

As of late July, KOC said it had paid nearly \$500,000 for more than 10,000 villagers affected by the spill, about \$580,000 for people at affected resorts

and about \$530,000 for the Barskoon water system. Government estimates of the cost of the spill range as high as \$42 million.

Whether any compensation from KOC ever will reach the impacted institutions and individuals remains in question.

Growing international outrage over the Kumtor debacle is now drawing attention to environmental problems at the mine site itself, including the potentially acid-generating waste rock that may be dumped on top of high mountain glaciers.

In meetings in October with Kyrgyz and other environmental groups at World Bank and OPIC headquarters in Washington, representatives of IFC, MIGA and OPIC confirmed that environmental problems do in fact exist at the mine site. However, all three institutions refuse to state what those problems are or publicly disclose environmental reports documenting the situation. And they have failed to enact any policies that might prevent a similar or more deadly accident from occurring.

— Douglas Norlen

*Douglas Norlen works with the Pacific Environment Resources Center.*

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