

THE PERFECT POTATO

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CTV W5

TOM CLARK: Welcome back to "W-FIVE". If you want the perfect French fry, you have to first have the perfect potato. And where better to seek that perfection than in Prince Edward Island. Not only is it a stunningly pretty province, but it is also the potato homeland of Canada. But a "W-FIVE" investigation has found that the potato is why that island is facing a potential environmental crisis. It centres on the widespread use of toxic pesticides. Three-quarters of a million kilograms a year that potato farmers spray on their fields in their quest to produce the large, unblemished potato that the French fry factories demand. But the problem is these poisonous chemicals can migrate. When there is a severe rainstorm, it is not unusual to see thousands of dead fish in the rivers. And now there is growing concern that these pesticides are causing serious human health problems too. As Jim O'Connell discovered, some Prince Edward Islanders are paying a very high price in the search for the perfect potato.

JACK MACANDREW: First thing I was aware of was a swelling in my lips. Then a stinging in my eyes. And sure enough, there was a guy spraying. In a 30 or 40-mile-an-hour east wind blowing directly at the house. It was like one of those old Hollywood movies where they release the gas, and it's coming towards you.

JIM O'CONNELL (Reporter): A picturesque paradise by the sea. Home to Anne of Green Gables, where the soil is red, and the economy is driven by tourism and potatoes. That's the wholesome image Prince Edward Island has enjoyed for generations. But something has gone wrong. This pastoral province may be poisoning itself. Prince Edward Island is covered with sprawling potato fields, most of them drenched with toxic pesticides. Seven thousand fields covering 110,000 acres. That's an awful lot of spuds. More than a billion kilograms produced every year on this tiny island. And there's constant pressure to produce even more, thanks in large part to North America's love affair with the French fry. Once proud potato farmers are now finding themselves under siege, blamed by their neighbours for wreaking environmental havoc on their island.

ALEX DOCHERTY (Potato Farmer): If I'm going down the road with a sprayer and people that don't know the difference are looking and saying, oh, look at the mean old potato farmer going, where one time I think we were respected people of the community.

O'CONNELL: Alex Docherty works the same land his great great-grandfather first sunk a plow in 150 years ago, but this is high-tech farming, where crops are doused with pesticides

every week. Individual farmers can easily spend a hundred thousand dollars a year just on chemicals to ward off bugs and disease. They say they have no choice.

DOCHERTY: Nobody's going to put in more spray than we should because of the cost of it. I value my ground water here and my land more than anybody.

O'CONNELL: The problem is pesticides don't always stay where they're supposed to. On the crops. When it rains hard, the chemicals can run off into nearby streams and rivers, destroying fish and other aquatic life. There have been at least twenty-six so-called fish kills in recent years, and seventeen rivers have been declared dead throughout the province, meaning virtually all forms of aquatic life wiped out. One fish kill was traced back to chemicals from Alex's farm.

DOCHERTY: It was a beautiful day when I sprayed. I was hardly into the field when a big black cloud come in, and boom, dropped an inch of rain on us in fifteen minutes.

O'CONNELL: That just washes the chemicals into the streams and the brooks.

DOCHERTY: Right.

O'CONNELL: How does that make you feel.

DOCHERTY: Terrible. I didn't want to see fish die.

O'CONNELL: If anyone should be worried about pesticides, it's farmers like Alex, who are exposed regularly to these chemicals. Some with documented links to human health problems such as cancer. A few years back, when Alex's wife was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma, he immediately wondered whether pesticides might have played a role.

DOCHERTY: I asked the doctor one time, was it connected? And he told me, flatly, no. That there was no possible connection that he could make. And that's what I wanted to know. That was five years ago. So if I had even an inkling that I was doing something that caused my wife to be sick or somebody else's wife to be sick, I wouldn't do what I do.

O'CONNELL: Robin Paynter is an avid fly fisher and conservationist who runs an organization to restore water ways that have been poisoned.

ROBIN PAYNTER: This is the Wilmot River that was killed back in mid-July.

O'CONNELL: He took us to see the Wilmot, a once-vibrant river which has been officially declared dead.

PAYNTER: We gathered up 7,000 trout.

O'CONNELL: Seven thousand dead trout?

PAYNTER: From this bridge downstream a kilometre. They prefer to lay their eggs over spring if they can so they get the constant water temperature and water flow, and they're finding out these fish are showing up with male and female sex organs, missing their spleen and missing other different things. The little fish are coming, and they're all twisted and distorted.

O'CONNELL: Robin and his troop of young volunteers are doing everything they can to save PEI's rivers and streams. Still, Robin feels he's fighting a losing battle.

PAYNTER: We finally got it working in a real pretty, a pretty nice working stream, and to have it snuffed out in twenty minutes of rain. Just like banging your head on a rock.

O'CONNELL: How would you describe how the province is act willing here? Are they acting in a responsible fashion or a cowardly fashion?

PAYNTER: Cowardly, I would say. You know, really. They don't seem to want to do anything that's going to amount to any kind of inconvenience to the farmers.

O'CONNELL: What has changed dramatically in recent years is the intense pressure on farmers to produce an endless supply of potatoes. These massive processing plants built in the late eighties fuelled an insatiable worldwide demand for the perfect unblemished potato to make the perfect French fry. As a result, potato acreage on the island nearly doubled. And pesticide sales increased by more than 600 percent from 1982 to 2000. In fact, farmers say they have to spray pesticides just to qualify for crop insurance.

PAYNTER: You smell it every day. There's not a day goes by you can't get a whiff of pesticides blowing through your windows of your truck or across your front yard.

O'CONNELL: The Dunk River, the Mighty Dunk, as Robin refers to it, is threatened as well. Here, the Prince County Fly Fishers build safe spawning grounds for brooke trout. Robin says if this river dies, his river, he'll have had enough, and will leave the province. After years of environmental damage, the PEI government has only just recently introduced laws to curb the run-off from pesticide-laced fields. They include buffer zones to keep the chemicals away from water ways. Restrictions on planting along steep slopes. And crop rotations.

GERALD MACDOUGALL (Ministry of the Environment): You don't have to go far to start to see potato fields.

O'CONNELL: "W-FIVE" went on a surveillance flight with Gerald MacDougall, an enforcement officer with the Ministry of the Environment, to see if farmers are complying with the new laws. Within minutes, the officer spotted numerous violations.

MACDOUGALL: If you look down there, down below, you can see all the run-off, you can actually see where it ran across the potato field and ran down into the stream there. We saw five tonight, five possible violations just tonight, in, what, 40 minutes that we were up.

O'CONNELL: In one month alone, enforcement officers spotted nearly 100 violations. But only a couple of farmers have been charged, with minimal fines of about \$200.00.

MACDOUGALL: I didn't realize that we'd see as many fields of non-compliance so we had to push the education side of it a lot more than we expected. Farmers really do seem to want to cooperate with us, and if anything, it seems to be more of a misunderstanding than anything else.

O'CONNELL: Manny Gallant is a shellfisher who has seen the devastating effect of pesticides in the surrounding seawaters.

MANNY GALLANT (Shellfisher): There's no way that that poison is going to stop at the fresh water mark. It's going to keep on going. It's going to go into the bays. The farmers, they've taken a lot of trees away from the brooks to gain more land so they can plant them bloody old potatoes.

O'CONNELL: If something's not done about this, what's going to happen to your island here?

GALLANT: I'm sure that the spray is going to kill other things too. What about people? You can go for a drive in the country, and you can pick out a country house there, and there's potato fields all the way around it. And you might even see a couple of kids out there playing in the yard. I mean, whenever they go there and spray them fields, nobody can tell me that that spray is not harming them kids.

SHARON LABCHUK (Environmentalist): We're trying to get pesticides banned on the island.

O'CONNELL: Environmentalist Sharon Labchuk has spent fifteen years lobbying for a ban on pesticides. She gained notoriety by posing naked in a potato field wearing only a gas

mask. So you're saying the image of Prince Edward Island as a lovely rolling hills, picturesque place is really a sham?

LABCHUK: It is a sham. Of course it's a sham. Beautiful to look at, but the air is poison, the water in the streams is poison, and people on Prince Edward Island are getting very sick from these chemicals. During spray season, I get a lot of calls from people who tell me that when the sprayer goes by their home, their kids are sick, they're throwing up, they've got nose bleeds, they've got headaches, they can't breathe, their lips and their tongues are swollen, that kind of thing. We also know that many of these chemicals are cancer causing, they're neurotoxic, they're hormone disrupters.

O'CONNELL: Sharon blames pesticides for an abnormally high rate of asthma and other health problems on the island. Medical studies have found that asthma reactions can be triggered by pesticide exposures. In fact, according to the latest study, PEI has the highest asthma death rate in all of Canada.

LABCHUK: And I visited every single school on the island, 60 some schools. Approximately 80 percent of rural Prince Edward Island children are going to school within half a kilometre of a sprayed field.

ANNOUNCER: When we return, are poisoned fish only the beginning? What will it take to get rid of these harmful toxins?

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: They have to go through your kidneys, your liver.

ANNOUNCER: Can we trust the government that these chemicals are safe?

UNIDENTIFIED MAN: If you see something that's dangerous that's hurting something, the environment, why not ban it?

ANNOUNCER: When CTV's "W-FIVE" continues.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

O'CONNELL: Six year old Jerry Costain has spent most of his life suffering from chronic asthma. He needs seven medications as day just to catch his breath. To say that asthma runs in this family is an understatement. Perry's mom, Carol, has it too. In fact, all four of her children have suffered from asthma.

CAROL COSTAIN: It's scary when you see your child laying on the examining table in the hospital, and the doctor not there, the nurses working around them, and drool coming out of

his mouth, and he's breathing so hard that his stomach is going under his ribs, and the tips of his fingers are purple.

O'CONNELL: Carol is convinced that pesticides from nearby farms are seriously harming her family.

COSTAIN: They want you to look after your children, they want you to keep them healthy and happy and so on and so on. And they're letting this happen. They don't give a damn about the sprays.

O'CONNELL: The Costain family lives in the town of Alberton, tucked away in the quiet countryside of Prince Edward Island. A province where hospitalization and death rates from asthma are the highest in the country. No visible signs of pollution here, no factories, no smokestacks. Just potato fields as far as the eye can see, potato fields covered with pesticides.

COSTAIN: So for the government to say that they're not, the chemicals are safe. Well, if they're safe, what the hell are the fish doing floating around dead? I think the government better get off their asses and take a look around and think about what they're saying about the chemicals are not hurting us. You know, that they're safe, because they're damn well not safe.

O'CONNELL: Jack MacAndrew is an outspoken newspaper columnist who lives in a country house that's surrounded by potato fields, and he's had a snoutful of pesticides more often than he cares to remember.

JACK MACANDREW (Newspaper Columnist): The public perception here most certainly is that what's going on the land to raise potatoes is putting people into hospital and causing deaths that need not be caused.

O'CONNELL: Do you get the sense that many farmers are saying listen, it's my land, I'll do with it what I want, don't tell me what to do?

MACANDREW: This has been the traditional approach, but that's not what we're arguing about. The moment that stuff escapes your land and goes into a brook, then it's a public matter. It's a matter of public health.

O'CONNELL: You've had firsthand experience right here at your home. Tell us about what happened.

MACANDREW: There was a very, very strong wind blowing directly out of the east, so it was blowing directly at the farmhouse, and I began to feel a stinging in my lower lip, and

then in my eyes, and sure enough, there was a guy spraying in a 30 or 40-mile-an-hour east wind blowing directly at the house. He waved to me as he went by, if you can believe it. We're dealing with poisons. Call them crop protectants, if you wish. The fact is they are poisons, and the label says they are poisons.

O'CONNELL: At this Environment Canada lab in Moncton, scientists examined fish from PEI to determine what killed them. Of all the chemicals used on Prince Edward Island potatoes, one shows up again and again. Azinphos-methyl, which destroys the nervous system and is known to be highly toxic to fish. The federal agency that regulates pesticides was warned about the danger of this chemical at least two years ago by Environment Canada, but is now just beginning a phase out process. It will take three more years. Wendy Sexsmith helps run the pesticide management regulatory agency, Ottawa's pesticide watchdog. If you see something that's dangerous that's hurting something, the environment, why not ban it. Ban it in three months. Not three years.

WENDY SEXSMITH (Environment Canada): If in fact there isn't an imminent hazard or a risk of imminent danger and it looks like...

O'CONNELL: You got twenty-seven fish kills in Prince Edward Island.

SEXSMITH: We're back to the Prince Edward Island issue. We know that that's a local issue.

O'CONNELL: But "W-FIVE" has found this is not merely a local issue. The US Environmental Protection Agency has also begun to phase out the use of Azinphos-methyl on potato crops, claiming it has killed hundreds of thousands of fish in the United States. Farmers say that there are safer substances being used in the States. They'd like to use them here. Is that the case?

SEXSMITH: Sixty-five percent of the reduced risk pesticides that are registered in the US are available here in Canada.

O'CONNELL: So thirty-five percent are not.

SEXSMITH: That's right. One has to realize that the pesticide companies that have to submit the pesticides to us. The companies look for markets. Canada tends to be a very small market in the world.

O'CONNELL: There is surprisingly little data on the impact of pesticides on humans. Dermatologist Dr. June Irwin is one of the very few physicians who have conducted independent studies, and she has found high levels of pesticides in the body fat of some patients.

DR. JUNE IRWIN (Dermatologist): I have heard government authorities saying don't worry, they only, they're gone by 48 hours, but they have to go through your kidneys, your liver. I mean, don't worry. Yes, worry. We need to worry.

O'CONNELL: Can you state unequivocally that the chemicals that are used today, the pesticides, are safe, absolutely safe, when it comes to human health?

SEXSMITH: Every pesticide, when they were registered were, assessed for human health, environmental safety, as well as efficacy. The whole point of the re-evaluation program is to review all of the pesticides that were registered historically and make sure that they meet modern safety standards.

O'CONNELL: So is that a yes or a no? Are they safe or not?

SEXSMITH: The answer is we're going to re-evaluate them.

O'CONNELL: So you're not sure? You have to have these tests to find out if they're safe.

SEXSMITH: Well, we have to re-evaluate the products to see if in fact they meet modern standards.

O'CONNELL: Because many of these haven't been tested in what, twenty, thirty, sometimes forty years?

SEXSMITH: There may be some that are very old, yeah.

O'CONNELL: We were also surprised to learn that Wendy Sexsmith's department, the federal agency that regulates pesticides, gets twenty-five percent of its funding from pesticide manufacturers. We're talking millions of dollars, what, eight, nine million dollars, perhaps, a year?

SEXSMITH: It's around eight.

O'CONNELL: That you rely on from funding from the companies that he regulate.

SEXSMITH: Well, it's eight million dollars that we get as part of our budget.

O'CONNELL: Don't you see that as a conflict of interest?

SEXSMITH: No. Not at all. It's not a fee-for-service, that is not a fee for a registration. It's a fee for an application, for review and evaluation. We make positive and negative decisions.

O'CONNELL: Not only that, all pesticide testing is done by the manufacturers, and no results can be released without the permission of the companies themselves. The information that is gathered in the studies is basically secret. It's up to them. They don't have to release it.

SEXSMITH: Well, both of those things that you said are true. If what you're asking me is can the public, at this point in time, and I mean that very broadly, look at the studies, the specific, exact studies.

O'CONNELL: That's what I'm asking you.

SEXSMITH: That have been produced by the company, the answer, currently is no.

O'CONNELL: So if the public wants to see any of this stuff, it can't do it?

SEXSMITH: We're not allowed to give out, right now, without permission from the registrar general.

O'CONNELL: Isn't that an incredible transparency problem? You're the government.

SEXSMITH: It's fact. And as I said, government is looking at changing that, if that's in fact possible.

O'CONNELL: Ottawa is now reviewing the safety of some 400 chemicals used in pesticides across the country. A process that will take years to complete. Until then, consumers are being asked to trust the government and the pesticide manufacturers. Trust that these chemicals are safe.