

Fact Sheet 8: The use of defoliants – Agent Orange

A highly controversial aspect of the Vietnam War was the widespread use of herbicides by the United States military. These chemicals caused the leaves of trees in the jungle to die. This made it easier to detect enemy positions and activities, especially from the air. Crops were also sprayed to deprive the enemy of food.

These chemicals included the 'Rainbow Herbicides' – Agent Pink, Agent Green, Agent Purple, Agent Blue, Agent White and, most famously, Agent Orange. The US Air Force sprayed approximately 75 million litres (of which Agent Orange accounted for about 45 million litres) of concentrated herbicides, affecting an estimated 13% of South Vietnam's land.

Humans exposed to Agent Orange were at risk of poisoning. Some estimates suggest that there were as many as 4 million victims of dioxin poisoning in Vietnam. Veterans of the war observed an increased risk of various types of cancer, while birth defects among their children were cited as evidence of the long-term harm caused by Agent Orange. The US government denied any conclusive scientific links between Agent Orange and health problems experienced by those exposed.

In 1984 US veterans obtained a \$180 million settlement from companies which produced Agent Orange. A small trust fund for New Zealanders who had been exposed was established as part of this settlement, but the fund was exhausted before the health problems of many veterans became apparent.

The New Zealand government initially stated that no New Zealanders were deployed in areas where defoliants were used. A 2001 report found no evidence that exposure to defoliants had affected the health of veterans' children, although it did bring new evidence of exposure. In 2003 a Health Committee of Parliament began an inquiry into the health of Vietnam veterans. Its 2004 report identified major flaws in earlier reports and concluded that veterans had been exposed to a 'toxic environment'. The government formally apologised to Vietnam War veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange or other toxic defoliants.

In early 2005, 700 veterans and family members, veterans' organisations and officials formed the Agent Orange Joint Working Group. This group was later known as the Joint Working Group on Concerns of Vietnam Veterans (JWG).