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## Ukraine's Ticking 'Time Bomb': Old Pesticides

by [Jennifer Hattam, Istanbul, Turkey](#) on 10.21.09

[Food & Health](#)



A haz-mat team containing a chemical stockpile. Photo via [Obsolete Pesticides](#).

When you think of dangerous stockpiles in the former Soviet Union, [nuclear](#) and chemical weapons are probably what come most readily to mind. But a single stash of old pesticides in Ukraine poses a major threat to some 7 million people -- and that's just the tip of the icky iceberg.

The environmental blog [Twilight Earth](#) has the scoop on the latest meeting of the [International HCH and Pesticides Association](#) (IHPA), which called on the European Union to immediately disarm the "biggest chemical time bomb of Europe."

(HCH, don't you know, is short for [hexachlorocyclohexane](#), a compound used to produce pesticides that has been linked to [Parkinson's disease](#).)

### **10,000 Tons of Carcinogenic Fungicide**

According to the IHPA, the former Kalush factory in western Ukraine contains at least 10,000 tons of hexachlorobenzene (HCB), a fungicide previously used on wheat that has been banned globally under the Stockholm Convention on [persistent organic pollutants](#). The toxic chemical is a confirmed

animal carcinogen and a probable contributor to cancer in humans as well; it was outlawed in the United States in 1966.

The Kalush chemicals pose a particular danger to human health and the environment because the factory is located along the Dniester river, Ukraine's second largest. "A single [flood](#) and the high concentrations of poison would pollute the natural habitat of some 7 million people in the west of Ukraine and Moldavia," the IHPA says.

### **Former USSR a Chemical Hot Spot**

Between 178,000 and 289,000 tons of obsolete [pesticides](#) are estimated to be stockpiled throughout the European Union, Southeast Europe, and the former Soviet Union, with Ukraine having one of the highest totals for an individual country: 30,000 tons in 4,500 storage locations.

"The substances have been prohibited since 2001. As a rule the packaging only lasts five to ten years," the IHPA says. "If nothing happens in that time, then the substances could simply end up in the soil or in the water."

### **Pesticides Illegally Exported by Organized Crime**

Rural populations are particularly at risk from such contamination of soil, groundwater, surface water, and air, which can be caused not only by the chemicals themselves, but also by the old sprayers, empty packages and containers, and building materials they have come into contact with, as well as the earth around the storage sites. The collection points in the former Soviet Union, known as "Polygons" or burial sites, are especially problematic due to the dissolution of the USSR, the IHPA explains:

The landfills were commonly fenced and guarded, and all amounts have been accurately registered. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union's central control system, Polygons were abandoned, fences were torn down, and pesticides were illegally excavated, repackaged, and sold onto local markets or exported by organized crime. Polygons -- by the sheer nature of the concept -- comprise a limited number of very large sites, often in combination with other hazardous waste.

Despite their concentration in certain areas, pesticide stockpiles have a worldwide impact. As highly stable chemicals, they persist in the environment -- and in people and animals' bodies.

### **Cleanup to Cost 1 Billion Euro**

The IHPA is working with national governments and other international organizations such as [Green Cross](#) to stabilize or safely destroy all current stocks of superfluous pesticides, an effort it estimates will cost 1 billion euros. So far, it has executed three pilot projects in Moldova, Georgia, and [Kyrgyzstan](#) to raise awareness and clean up and safely contain pesticide inventories.