

Statement of Rachel Carson Before the Subcommittee on Reorganization and International Organizations of the Committee on Government Operations

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS CONTROL OF PESTICIDES AND OTHER CHEMICAL POISONS

June 4, 1963

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the opportunity to discuss with you this morning the problems of environmental hazards and the control of pesticides.

The contamination of the environment with harmful substances is one of the major problems of modern life. The world of air and water and soil supports not only the hundreds of thousands of species of animals and plants, it supports man himself. In the past we have often chosen to ignore this fact. Now we are receiving sharp reminders that our heedless and destructive acts enter into the vast cycles of the earth and in time return to bring hazard to ourselves. The problem you have chosen to explore is one that must be resolved in our time. I feel strongly that a beginning must be made on it now, — in this session of Congress. For this reason I was delighted when I heard, Mr. Chairman, that you were planning to hold hearings on the whole vast problem of environmental pollution. Contamination of various kinds has now invaded all of the physical environment that supports us — water, soil, air, and vegetation. It has even penetrated that internal environment within the bodies of animals and of men. It comes from many sources: radioactive wastes from reactors, laboratories and hospitals, fallout from nuclear explosions, domestic wastes from cities and towns; chemical wastes from factories, detergents from homes and industries.

When we review the history of mankind in relation to the earth we cannot help feeling somewhat discouraged, for that history is for the most part that of the blind or short-sighted despoiling of the soil, forests, waters and all the rest of the earth's resources. We have acquired technical skills on a scale undreamed of even a generation ago. We can do dramatic things and we can do them quickly; by the time damaging side effects are apparent it is often too late, or impossible, to reverse our actions. These are unpleasant facts, but they have given rise to the disturbing situations that this committee has now undertaken to examine.

I have pointed out before, and I shall repeat now, that the problem of pesticides can be properly understood only in context, as part of the general introduction of harmful substances into the environment. In water and soil, and in our own bodies, these chemicals are mingled with others, or with radioactive substances. There are little understood interactions and summations of effect. No one fully understands, for example, what happens when pesticide residues stored in our bodies interact with drugs repeatedly taken. And there are some indications that detergents, which are often present in our drinking water, may affect the lining of the digestive tract so that it more readily absorbs cancer-causing chemicals. In attempting to assess the role of pesticides, people too often assume that these chemicals are being introduced into a simple, easily controlled environment, as in a laboratory experiment. This, of course, far from true.