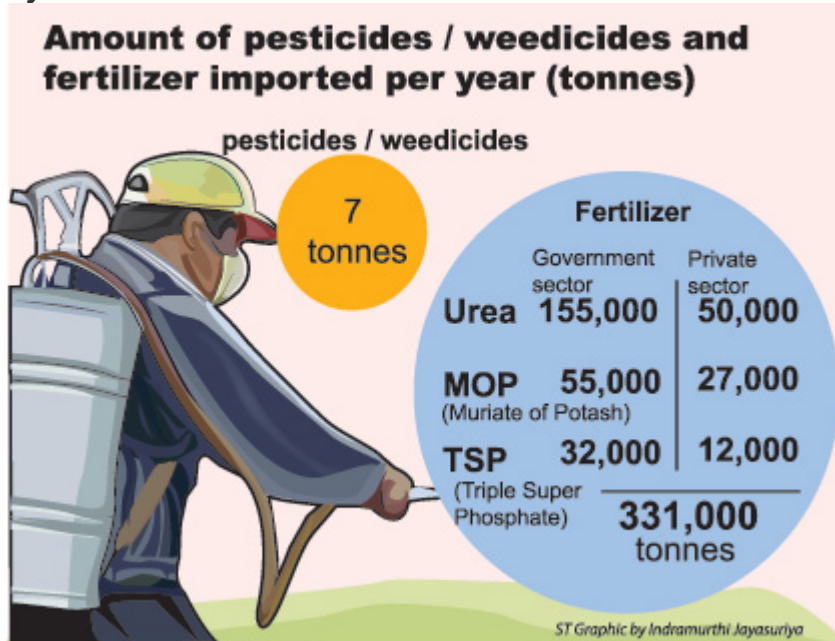


Authorities say fertiliser, pesticides use not contributory factors

View(s): 190

WHO study on kidney disease affecting Dry Zone farmers

By Kumudini Hettiarachchi and Shaveen Jeewandara



Top Government authorities, facing head-on the charges that agrochemicals may be a contributory factor in the mysterious kidney disease affecting mainly Dry Zone farmers, reiterated that there are rigid checks on imports of both fertiliser and pesticides. All fertiliser imported to the country is checked and has to conform to international standards, said Agriculture Minister Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena, while the Pesticides Registrar Dr. Anura Wijesekara was equally adamant that pesticides are also in keeping with world standards.

The assurances came when the Sunday Times contacted them over a World Health Organization-government study which has raised concerns over heavy metal exposure of victims of Chronic Kidney Disease of Uncertain Aetiology (CKDu). "Findings suggest that chronic exposure to cadmium may be playing a role in the causation of CKDu and co-exposure to arsenic is likely to aggravate the effect of cadmium on the kidney," the WHO study said.

It added that one or more pesticide residues were above reference levels in 31.6% of people with CKDu. "Residues are demonstrative of the extent of the environmental distribution of pesticides and certain pesticides are nephrotoxic. Simultaneous exposure to nephrotoxic pesticides may be contributing to the progression of the disease in people with CKDu," the study said.

Stressing that the WHO study was not conclusive, the Minister said that there is a stringent evaluation process for fertiliser imports. When the authorities announce the

fertiliser requirements, the suppliers have to tender for it along with international certification of standards by the manufacturing company. Both the documents and pricing are checked by a Technical Evaluation Committee during the tender process.

When the shipment arrives here, random samples are taken by the Fertiliser Secretariat and sent for testing to three independent laboratories including the ITI. It is only after they clear it that the Fertiliser Secretariat gives the green light for the release of the shipment, he said. Fertiliser is mainly imported from Russia, Ukraine, Qatar and Indonesia, while a small amount is from China, the Minister said, warding off allegations that substandard fertiliser is brought down from both China and Latin America.

Conceding that farmers may be over-using fertiliser, he said that his ministry has instructed the Bathalagoda Rice Research Institute to determine how much fertiliser should be applied to get the best yield, after which farmers would be made aware of the quantities to be used. The Minister pointed out that the Government was also allocating as much as Rs. 750 million per year to produce and promote organic fertiliser.

Meanwhile, the Pesticides Registrar Dr. Anura Wijesekera said that strict checks are carried out with regard to pesticides. When there is a requirement in the country for pesticides, companies interested in importing them have to submit a detailed dossier which includes the chemical and physical properties, effects on the environment and toxicity as well as the analytical methods.

Explaining that the two main ingredients in a pesticide are the 'active ingredient' which is responsible for killing the pests and the 'adjuvant' which is usually inert and helps in its application, he said together it is called the 'pesticide formulation'. The 'recipe' is usually a trade secret but it is revealed to the Registrar of Pesticides.

"We look into this carefully and also whether there are carcinogenic properties, after which we register that pesticide and issue a licence to import a particular batch. When the batch is imported we test the active ingredient for concentration and impurities at an accredited laboratory," said Dr. Wijesekera, adding that it is only then that the pesticide is released for distribution.

WHO report to Cabinet next week

The WHO report will be presented to the Cabinet by Health Minister Maithripala Sirisena next week, said Minister Yapa Abeywardena and the necessary course of action taken after that. ♦ Although the report was due to be submitted last week, there was no Cabinet meeting and as such it will be done this week, he said.