

“Emerging Water Contaminants”

An Interview with Ruth Gonseth

Dr. Ruth Gonseth was a representative of the Green Party in the Swiss National Parliament (Nationalrat) from 1991 to 2001. In this function, Dr. Gonseth was intensively concerned about contaminants in water and has submitted two legislative proposals “Research Need: Chemicals with Endocrine Effects” and “Reduction of Hormonally Active Substances”. Dr. Gonseth has a dermatology practice and is an active member of the association “Doctors for Environmental Protection”. EAWAG News interviewed Dr. Gonseth about the motives of her involvement in these issues, Switzerland’s role in the international scene, and what she expects from research.

EAWAG news: You are very actively involved in issues of contaminants and pollution. What are your motives?

Ruth Gonseth: I have been interested in these kinds of problems for a long time. I have always taken special notice of reports on chemical spills, particularly when it involved chemicals that can have detrimental effects on animals and humans in even very low concentrations. At the same time, I always look at these incidents through the eyes of a physician. I am very disturbed by the increase in problems related to the male

and female reproductive systems, particularly the rising number of cancers involving the breasts, testicles and prostate gland where a connection with endocrine environmental pollutants has been suggested. I only became really active after reading the report by the BUWAL (Federal Office of Environment, Forests and Landscape) on “Chemicals with Endocrine Properties in the Environment”, which was coauthored by EAWAG. The document is a status report and is particularly interesting for how much it revealed that we do not know. I was

shocked to learn that over the last five years, Switzerland has only spent about 500,000 CHF on research related to this very important topic. This is why I launched my first legislative proposal in 1999. I followed it up with a second interpellation in the spring of 2000 after the National Council (Bundesrat) failed to initiate any convincing measures. During the same period, the OECD had released a report on the loss of animal and plant species, which is more pronounced in Switzerland than in other countries. Among other factors, water contamination is quoted as one of the major possible causes. 45 out of 54 fish species in Switzerland are endangered. This is an absolutely terrifying number!

Are you satisfied with the outcome of your interpellation?

Yes, I am satisfied for the time being. After my second interpellation, the National Council established the national research program “Hormonally Active Chemicals in the Environment – Importance for Humans and Animals”. The Federal government will be providing 15 Million CHF over the next five years. Switzerland has excellent scientists working in this field who will now be able to provide basic research in this problem area.

It appears that things have started to move on the research side. What measures do you think the government should introduce immediately in order to minimize the risk of hazardous substances in the short- to mid-terms?

Before we can make decisions of any kind, we need a comprehensive inventory of contaminant emissions. In such an inventory, we must compile the amounts and potential risks of environmental pollutants, similar to what we are already doing for atmospheric pollutants. I think it will be a wake-up call when we see the list of compounds that are actually released into the environment and into water in particular.

At the same time, many compounds that are currently in use must be re-examined for their hormonal activities, as is already



Photos: S. Wey, Zurich

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being done for sun protection chemicals. In situations where toxic or other detrimental effects on organisms or the environment already have been documented unequivocally, as is the case for nonylphenols in detergents for example, I advocate a strict ban of use of these compounds.

But we cannot limit ourselves to fighting the symptoms after-the-fact. Producers and distributors of these compounds must shoulder more of the responsibility. We must introduce the “pay-as-you-pollute” principle, along with financial or other incentives and stricter liability laws. This would give industry some motivation to extensively test new chemicals and refrain from introducing such compounds if there is even the slightest sign of a problem.

Do you think the “pay-as-you-pollute” principle is enforceable?

It certainly is difficult; the lobby of the manufacturing industry is very powerful. At the same time, many of the users of these chemicals are also not interested in fundamental changes. Our intensive agricultural industry, for example, presents an enormous problem. Pesticides are still being used in huge quantities and end up in the environment. We have to move away from using these poisons. I am a strong advocate of biological agriculture. The increased demand for bioproducts by consumers is a huge opportunity for bringing about a fundamental change in our production methods, although I think that we need to increase the competitiveness of bioproducts by levying fees on pesticides.

The problem of environmental pollutants is a global one. What political goals should Switzerland pursue on the international level?

Switzerland has to become more engaged in international panels. It is an urgent goal to come to international agreements on pollutant levels. We are well off in Switzerland, being in the water reservoir of Europe, but countries farther downstream, along the Rhine for example, are still confronted with enormous problems. Despite the fact that

pollutant concentrations have continually dropped over the last few years, we cannot cancel the alarm quite yet. This is why the work of the “International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine” is so important. It brings together all of the countries in the Rhine watershed at one table for a joint effort to find solutions.

A second important problem concerns southern countries. Many people do not have access to uncontaminated drinking water. We already know that the water supply will become even tighter in the future and that water will become a source of conflict. As a privileged country, we have the obligation to provide “know-how”. An urgent issue, for example, is wastewater treatment, which is completely lacking even in large cities. Agriculture needs new water conservation technologies since approximately two thirds of the irrigation water is being wasted – it evaporates – although more appropriate irrigation systems could mitigate this problem. This is another area where Switzerland could provide useful research.

In your parliamentary proposal for an international water convention, you challenge politicians to become more active. What are the goals of such a convention?

I would like the National Council to become an advocate for an international water convention in the appropriate panels, e.g., in RIO 2002. The main points of the convention would be to effectively protect water as a common public good and to establish access to clean drinking water as a basic human right. It will require a huge effort to guarantee this basic human right, particularly because of the privatization tendencies in this area. This does not mean that I am against cooperation with private enterprises, but the government has to retain authority over the drinking water supply.

Finally, the question: what homework would the politician Ruth Gosseth like to give to the research community?

First, I am relieved that the Federal Government funds the national research program



“Water is a public and common good.”

“Hormonally Active Chemicals in the Environment”. The urgent task is now to fill the gaps in our scientific knowledge in order to understand the reasons for the disappearance of species, the increase of cancer and other phenomena. But I also think that the scientific community has to increasingly carry this topic into public discussions in order to raise the awareness that we have been treating “water” rather carelessly. Secondly I believe that scientists have to take on a more political role. Knowledge transfer is working well within the scientific community through scientific journals. The same transfer has to be possible between the scientific community and politicians.

I thank you very much for this conversation.

Interview by Martina Bauchrowitz