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Eight Times Agent Orange's Biggest Defender Has Been Wrong or Misleading

by [Charles Ornstein](#) and [Sisi Wei](#), ProPublica, and [Mike Hixenbaugh](#), *The Virginian-Pilot*, October 26, 2016

For nearly 50 years, the U.S. government has relied heavily on Alvin Young to advise it on herbicides, including most famously Agent Orange, used to destroy dense foliage thought to hide enemy troops during the Vietnam War. His reports have helped determine whether vets were exposed to the toxic herbicide and are due benefits for related illnesses. Some of Young's conclusions have been criticized by other scientists and government officials. Below are some of Young's statements, as well as what others have said about them. [Related story »](#)



What did Alvin Young say?

In some of his earliest studies on Agent Orange, Young and colleagues found no sign of dioxin in the soil after heavy spraying at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. They concluded

What was incomplete or misleading?

Years later, Young acknowledged that equipment was not yet available to detect dioxin in small enough concentrations. When such equipment was used, it

Circa 1969
(47 years ago)

that dioxin dissolved quickly, dismissing concerns of widespread contamination.

Source: [Ecological Studies on a Herbicide-Equipment Test Area](#)

found dioxin. "We were wrong," he told the Washington Post in 1983, adding that he is more careful about what he prints.

Source: [Washington Post](#)

Late 1960s

In an undated letter from the late 1960s, Young wrote that "workers in the chemical manufacturing plants have not been adversely affected. There has been no documentable death or injury from association with the chemicals. The same is true in the use of these chemicals in Vietnam."

Source: [Letter: To Mrs. Cleary From Alvin L. Young Regarding Use Of Herbicides In Southeast Asia](#)

A number of subsequent studies have shown there were health impacts on chemical plant workers exposed to herbicides and the contaminant TCDD (dioxin). In an email to a vet a few years ago, however, Young remembered the letter and said what he wrote about the safety of the herbicides remains true.

Source: [Institute of Medicine, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

Nov. 2012 (4 years ago)

In a report on reservists who flew in C-123 airplanes (which sprayed Agent Orange during the war) in

The Institute of Medicine said Young's reports had a number of inaccuracies: His contention that TCDD stuck

the years after Vietnam, Young concluded, "All the analytical and scientific studies suggested that if they were exposed, that exposure was negligible." Although some samples taken from the C-123s showed traces of dioxin, it was nothing to be concerned about, Young wrote, since the chemicals stick to metal and aren't easily absorbed through the skin.

Source: [Investigations Into The Allegations Of Agent Orange/dioxin Exposure From Former Ranch Hand Aircraft](#)

to metal and would not rub off without a solvent "appears to be conjecture and not evidence-based" and his assertion that "skin is a major barrier to TCDD uptake" was based on a study funded by Dow Chemical Co., one of the herbicide's makers.

Source: [IOM Report, Post-Vietnam Dioxin Exposure in Agent Orange-Contaminated C-123 Aircraft, 2015.](#)

Jan. 2013
(3 years ago)

In a report on Agent Blue, which was also sprayed during the Vietnam War, Young wrote that the toxicity of cacodylic acid, a key ingredient, "is considered low." "Reviews of the limited studies of cacodylic acid have concluded that it is not likely to be a carcinogen,

Cacodylic acid, also known as Dimethylarsinic acid or "DMA", is carcinogenic in both rats and mice, studies suggest. Human data is lacking.

Source: [Toxicology journal, Environmental Protection Agency](#)

teratogen or a mutagen in laboratory animals or man."

Source: [Investigations Into The Allegations Concerning Agent Blue](#)

March 2013

In a report on 2,4,5-T, another herbicide in Agent Orange, Young wrote that a major Air Force study found no evidence that it caused health problems in those who served on planes that sprayed Agent Orange.

"The scientific evidence supported the conclusion that there has been a disconnect between perception and reality as to hazards and human risks of 2,4,5-T and its associated dioxin contaminant when used in commercial and military programs."

Source: [Investigations Into The Allegations Concerning 2,4,5-T Herbicide](#)

Numerous studies have shown an association between exposure to the dioxin contaminant, TCDD, and health problems. And, according to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report on 2,4,5-T, "epidemiological studies have reported associations of several types of cancer, such as soft tissue sarcoma and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, with the exposure to" herbicides such as Agent Orange, although how and why is still unclear.

Source: [Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine article, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

Aug. 2013

Arguing that those who served on Navy vessels off the coast of Vietnam were

Joel Michalek, a professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at the

not exposed to the herbicides, Young wrote, "Common sense tells us that there was never a sufficient quantity of TCDD applied in Vietnam to ever be measureable (even by a factor ten) in the waters off the coast of Vietnam." He quoted a scientist as saying the quantity of 1 picogram per gram is the equivalent of "1 drop of vermouth in a pool of gin covering the area of [a] football field 43 feet deep."

Source: [Discussion Points Concerning Blue Water Navy Claims](#)

University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio and the principal investigator on a major Agent Orange study, countered in an email: "The uninformed reader may wrongly interpret this unit conversion as evidence that TCDD is safe. In fact, no data is offered to indicate that TCDD is safe in any of these reports. ... Persistent organic pollutants at the parts per trillion concentration have been found associated with adverse health in animals and people."

Source: Michalek note to ProPublica

Dec. 2013

In a report on 2,4-D, a herbicide that is a major component of Agent Orange, Young wrote that, "there is no evidence of cancer in animal tests, no evidence of reproductive toxicity, nor any evidence of birth defects. ... It is not

Some evidence suggests that 2,4-D could cause health effects, particularly in lab tests. As a result, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (part of the World Health Organization) in 2015 listed 2,4-D as "possibly

considered a human carcinogen, and the epidemiological data provide no convincing or consistent evidence of any chronic adverse effects of 2,4-D in humans."

Source: [Investigations Into The Allegations Concerning 2,4,5-T Herbicide](#)

carcinogenic" to humans. The Natural Resources Defense Council calls the herbicide "the most dangerous pesticide you've never heard of."

Source: [International Agency for Research on Cancer, Natural Resources Defense Council](#)

Feb. 2014
(2 years ago)

Young said the risk of human harm from soil contaminated with TCDD, a dioxin contaminant in Agent Orange, was low in a report on TCDD's environmental impact. "In humans, handling contaminated soil resulted in negligible contamination since the skin acted as an effective barrier to the uptake of the TCDD."

Source: [Investigation Into The Environmental Fate Of TCDD/DIOXIN](#)

Experts note that the issue is not just absorption through the skin. People put their hands in their mouths and can absorb it orally. The risk can be magnified if the chemical makes its way into the food chain.

Source: Interviews with Michalek and Linda S. Birnbaum, director, National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences