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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

June 5, 2007

The Honorable Jason Altmire
U.S. House of Representatives
1419 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC, 20515

Dear Congressman Altmire,

Thank you for your letter regarding the bill naming a Pennsylvania post office after Rachel Carson. I have no doubt that your intentions are pure in your effort to honor a prominent citizen from your district, but I believe that honoring Carson and her legacy is a serious mistake.

While it was appropriate at the time for someone to call for a closer examination of our pesticide policies, to ensure more judicious use, Rachel Carson did not focus on constructive advice. Much of her rhetoric was extreme and her science highly questionable. In particular, her alarmist tone produced fear, rather than rational evaluation of the issues at hand. As a result, the public policies that followed have produced tragic results.

The most egregious example is Carson's condemnation of the pesticide DDT, which the United States and many European countries used to eradicate malaria in our midst. However, once we no longer needed it and after Carson provided incorrect information about its risks, we banned DDT. EPA Administrator William Ruckelshaus took this action against the recommendations of his own DDT review panel - which had concluded that there was no scientific evidence that DDT caused serious adverse public health impacts - and without even attending any of its extensive meetings or reading any of its exhaustive findings.

At the time, DDT was responsible for much of the dramatic progress in reducing malaria rates in developing nations, but these nations had *not yet eradicated* the disease. Despite some increase in resistance to the chemical developing among mosquitoes, DDT was still quite effective – the cheapest and most effective tool those nations had – and resistance was being minimized through proper use. At the time, there simply was no excuse to abandon the best weapon (then and perhaps still) available in the battle against malaria.

However, given the negative publicity and the U.S. ban, many developing nations and world aid agencies simply discontinued DDT (or refused to fund its use), despite its value in fighting malaria. Since then, malaria rates have skyrocketed, killing more than a million people a year

(mostly children under five), making 300 million to 500 million a year seriously ill, and leaving countless victims with severe and permanent brain damage.

It is clear that DDT can be used in residential settings - without any danger of public health or environmental problems - to save lives today. South Africa and Zambia have done so in recent years – even in the face of hysteria from environmental activists from the West. In fact, that is why the UN's World Health Organization, and U.S. Agency for International Development have endorsed its use for that purpose. That is why it is so tragic and ironic that Rachel Carson's followers still fight the use of such a life-saver. Even they must recognize that Carson's legacy does include the banning of DDT. Rather than working to repeal that ban as an unintended consequence of her legacy, they direct their energies instead to those of us who are fighting desperately to increase the use of *all* effective weapons in the battle against malaria. Rather than acknowledge the horrendous consequences of the ban her book and her activism inspired, they seek to protect Rachel Carson's reputation and celebrate her legacy even today, as malaria deaths increase around the world.

The photos of some of the millions of children who have died from malaria are featured at www.rachelwaswrong.org. Looking at these pictures brings great sorrow to me. I cannot understand why anyone would honor that legacy, no matter how well-intentioned Carson might have been at the time. The fact is, no matter how much some might want to ignore the suffering, brain damage and death caused by rampant malaria, they are as much a part of her legacy as those aspects that others want to commemorate, by renaming post offices in her honor or otherwise marking the anniversary of her birth.

I invite you to join my fight to bring quality and accountability to global malaria control programs. Chairman Carper and I have conducted extensive oversight on this issue in our work on the Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, Federal Services and International Security. We are always looking for more allies in the fight to save lives from malaria, a disease which can be inexpensively prevented and cured, when prevention and treatment are done right.

Please understand. This is not a political issue to me. It is a moral obligation to stand up for the children around the world who even today are still suffering needlessly from malaria. We know how to control malaria. We did it in our own country. We used tools that Rachel Carson helped to vilify. As a father, a grandfather, and a medical professional, I cannot support any Federal effort to honor this legacy.

Sincerely,



Tom Coburn, MD

cc: Senator Robert Casey
Senator Arlen Specter
Senator Ben Cardin