**Coca-Cola in India accused of leaving farms parched and land poisoned**

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The largest Coca-Cola plant in India is being accused of putting thousands of farmers out of work by draining the water that feeds their wells, and poisoning the land with waste sludge that the company claims is fertiliser.

The plant in the southern state of Kerala is designed to satisfy the demand for Coke in what has become the multinational company's fastest growing market.

But its huge demand for water is causing such damage to the local economy that the village council which had granted the company a licence to operate is now demanding the plant's closure.

So desperate have the nearest villagers become for water since their wells dried up that Coca-Cola sends water tankers round every morning to supply minimum needs.

The company denies the shortages have anything to do with its use of up to 1m litres of water a day from the underground aquifer that used to keep the wells topped up.

The charity ActionAid says the crisis facing the once prosperous farming area is an example of the worst kind of inward investment by multinational companies in developing countries.

In a report to the World Trade Organisation's meeting in Cancun, Mexico, in September the charity says this kind of abuse must be controlled.

The report says Plachimada was a thriving agricultural community until Coca-Cola set up the bottling plant in 1998. Coconut groves and vegetable crops have had to be abandoned because of the lack of water.

ActionAid says thousands of people worked on the land but now just 141 are employed at the plant, with a further 250 as casual labourers. Peaceful sit-in protests have been going on for more than four months. In a hut outside the plant a large Coca-Cola bottle is kept in a coffin.

In a report today on Radio 4's Face the Facts programme details of the contaminants in the sludge Coca-Cola sells as fertiliser, gives away, or sometimes dumps in dry riverbeds are revealed for the first time.

Samples taken in India and analysed by Exeter University show high levels of lead and cadmium in the sludge.

Lead is particularly bad for children, affecting their nervous system, and cadmium is taken up by plants, is toxic to the kidneys and liver and can cause cancer.

The report by David Santillo says: "Repeated applications of sludge, containing these sorts of levels of cadmium and lead, to agricultural soils would undoubtedly lead to a build-up of these toxic metals in the soil, from where cadmium could then be transferred to plants \_ and therefore into the food chain.

"This contaminated sludge sample also contained a high component of phosphorus, presumably the reason for its promotion as a fertiliser.

However, the presence of high levels of cadmium and lead in the sludge make it completely unsuitable for use as a fertiliser."

Sunil Gupta, vice-president of Coca-Cola India, says the company has been the target of a handful of extremist protesters and it is lack of rainfall that has caused local water supplies to be exhausted. The company claims to use a maximum of 600,000 litres a day.

Mr Gupta also says Coca-Cola undertook an environmental impact assessment before building the plant, but has declined to make one available.

He stood by the claim that the sludge waste from the plant was fertiliser and said the company complied with all local environmental laws and stood for the welfare of the community.

So far attempts by the local council to shut the plant have failed. An order by the Perumatty village council cancelling the company's licence to operate, on the grounds that the bottling plant was over-exploiting the water resources, was overruled by the Kerala high court last month