

Time To Face Up To Pesticides

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In August 2010, six tonnes of cherries imported from the US failed the Taiwanese authorities' pesticide screening when they detected malathion, a chemical banned in Taiwan.

Wal-Mart in China was accused of putting profit before people in October 2010 when Greenpeace China issued its findings on toxic pesticide residues, including carbofuran and parathion (both banned in China), which were detected on fresh produce sold in a Wal-Mart outlet in Beijing.

In 2008, a report published by the USDA stated that it had found organophosphates on around one quarter of frozen blueberry, green bean and strawberry samples, as well as on 20% of celery and 17% of peaches.

In short, no geography or country is unaffected by pesticide contamination, be these substances legal, illegal, present in excessive levels or within permitted parameters. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention runs a biomonitoring programme which detected pesticides in the blood and urine of 95.6% of the 5,000 individuals tested in 2009.

Although pesticides have to undergo fairly rigorous health and safety testing protocols before they are licensed for use in most markets, their cumulative effects on human health, even at low levels, are virtually impossible to ascertain through scientific studies.

The issue is further confounded by the continued (and often illegal) use of dangerous pesticides, particularly in developing markets, which are major exporters of fresh fruits and vegetables.

China and India, for example, frequently come under fire for failing to enforce pesticide bans. The presence of prohibited pesticides in Chinese produce and food products has significantly and repeatedly harmed China's trade relationship with Japan, one of its primary export markets.

Confusion reigns

There are many non-profit organisations around the world which have set themselves the task of aiding consumers in navigating the pesticide gauntlet.

For example, by analysing thousands of USDA and US FDA produce pesticide reports, the US-based Environmental Working Group (EWG) published the Shoppers' Guide to Pesticides in 2010. It is composed of two simple lists of commonly eaten fruits and vegetables, referred to as the "Dirty Dozen" and the "Clean 15".

The Dirty Dozen, deemed to be the 12 types of fruits and vegetables worst affected by pesticide contamination, is headed by celery, followed by peaches, strawberries, apples and blueberries. Potatoes rank 11th. The EWG advises consumers to buy these organic.

The Clean 15, regarded as having the lowest pesticide loads, features onions, avocados, sweetcorn, pineapple, mangos, asparagus, cabbage, watermelon, sweet potato and grapefruit.

Supermarkets could do more

Retailers, on the whole, are not as engaged in the pesticide debate as they could be. According to Pesticide Action Network UK, only three of the UK's top 10 grocery retailers - the Co-op, Sainsbury's and Marks & Spencer - publish information on their pesticide residue testing results, and only the latter two have drawn up concrete action plans (beyond mere legal compliance) to reduce and/or eliminate a number of common pesticides from their fresh produce aisles.

Although all of the 10 retailers examined appeared to be taking at least some tentative steps into this direction, only the Co-op, Marks & Spencer and Waitrose seemed to be providing active technical support for growers to reduce their reliance on pesticides.

Also, as the UK is one of the global markets where retailers wield the most influence on primary producers by virtue of their ever more tightly integrated vertical supply chains and high degree of market consolidation, this does not bode too well for retailer proactivity on curbing pesticide contamination in other countries.

The rise of retailer power across the globe should bring with it a pronounced shift of responsibility towards the retail channel in terms of offering better and safer products " not in the least motivated by their desire to differentiate themselves from their competitors.

And in many respects, this is exactly what is happening, for example when it comes to ethical and local sourcing, fairtrade, animal welfare issues and, of late, by providing more environmentally-sustainable offerings, especially in the area of fish and seafood.

The ugly issue of pesticides, however, keeps being swept under the carpet. Retailers do not even want to alert consumers that pesticide residues are a concern at all.

According to Pesticide Action Network UK's top 10 retailer analysis, none of the retailers were found to be engaging with consumers on what the organisation termed "unnecessary use of pesticides for the purpose of improving the cosmetic appearance of fruit and vegetables".

The larger retailers, however, have it in their power to employ a potentially very effective three-pronged approach, which entails becoming more active in assisting the farmers who supply their produce, eg by providing information and training on limiting pesticide deployment to what is absolutely necessary, by strengthening their testing procedures and, thirdly, by not shying away from educating their consumer base on how to minimise their pesticide exposure without being forced to go down the costly organic route.

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