

One pest we can't get rid of

Environmental lobby groups are still misleading consumers about the health risks of pesticides

By Will Verboven - July 11, 2005, *Western Standard Magazine*
Re-printed by Yorkton Aircraft Service Ltd. with Permission of the Publisher

One of the most enduring articles of faith in the environmental lobby business is that all of our food is saturated with pesticides. It's an issue that goes back to the very beginning of the environmental movement in 1962, when Rachel Carson wrote the book *Silent Spring*, which became the anti-pesticide bible for zealous environmentalists everywhere. The fact that most of the allegations about DDT in the book were later debunked by research made no difference to those blinded by environmental ideology and mythology. But that's another story.

The notion that food is contaminated with pesticides is very pervasive amongst consumers. A February survey by polling firm Pollara Inc. found that 81 per cent of Canadian consumers were concerned with pesticide use and 77 per cent felt they were injurious to human health. Since the vast majority of consumers have little understanding of modern agricultural crop production practices, it would be safe to assume that their opinions on the topic are the result of 40 years of fear mongering by lobby groups. That misguided consumer perception has also served the interests of the organic food industry very well.

Organic food is always marketed as being pesticide-free, thereby making it somehow safer in the eyes of gullible consumers. Fear of the unknown is usually a good marketing tool, particularly when it is espoused from the moral high ground.

That's why a recent analysis of data collected by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency is bad news indeed for the purveyors of anti-pesticide propaganda and the organic food business. The analysis showed that pesticide residues are at their lowest level ever. More than 99 per cent of fresh fruits, vegetables and other food products were found to be within Health Canada's maximum residue limits. It gets even better: it was found that 80 per cent of fresh foods had no detectable amounts of pesticide; processed foods were at 90 per cent.

That should cause consumers to ponder why, if pesticide residue is so low or undetectable, anyone would pay premium prices for organic foods when the difference is less than negligible. Why indeed. But trust environmental groups to continue to spin their

disinformation. A spokesperson for the World Wildlife Fund said that, regardless of the finding, any residue is still too high. One could hardly expect any environmental group to see anything positive in the data, particularly since the pesticide issue has been such a fundraising cash cow for so many years.

What consumers never seem to realize--and lobby groups skillfully avoid mentioning--is the scientific principle that the dosage is the poison. Consumer ignorance of that principle is the key to the success that lobby groups have had in portraying the mythology that all pesticides are a danger to our health. Few consumers are aware that residues are measured in parts per million or even billion and that for a human to get a lethal dose of pesticide, hundreds of pounds of a vegetable would have to be consumed daily for a year--a level of consumption unlikely even for the most determined vegetarian.

You'd have to eat hundreds of pounds of a vegetable every day for a year to get a lethal dose of pesticide.

Lobby groups are also selective about which residues they demonize. If they were honest about residues and carcinogens in food they would also have to warn consumers of the danger of eating organic broccoli. In the language used by those folks, the warning would look like this:

"Broccoli contains high levels of cancer-causing arsenic that is a potential health hazard to humans." Arsenic is found naturally in most soils and is absorbed by broccoli as it grows, but only in parts per million similar to pesticides.

The point is that neither arsenic nor pesticides are any danger to human health when actual dosage levels in foods are considered. But that reality does not serve the interests of environmental lobby groups or the organic food industry. They are in the business of duping the public about pesticides for fundraising purposes or selling over-priced organic food products.

Curiously, governments seem reluctant to become proactive about telling consumers the reality of pesticide residues and the bogus allegations of the environmental lobby. I suspect that has more to do with the increasing predilection for governments to want to appear politically correct for fear of the wrath of environmental groups when their sacred cows are challenged.