

Healthy plants equal healthy food

Agriculture | Pesticide use and regulation | 03 November 2003

Consumers may wonder, as they bite into a piece of fresh fruit or crunch on a vegetable, what extra “ingredients” they might be about to swallow. The latest report from the European Commission on pesticides and food should allay any concerns in the minds of those who appreciate the goodness in healthy, fresh produce. Meanwhile, EU policy makers are currently reviewing already strict rules on the use of pesticides in food production to ensure they are applied stringently.

Consumers need not fear the use of pesticides on the food that they eat. According to a report on monitoring programmes carried out by EU countries in 2001, most of the products we eat (fruit and vegetables, cereals, and foods of animal and plant origin) which have been treated with pesticides do not carry residues at levels that are harmful. In fact, 96% of samples tested by national authorities and the EU’s Food and Veterinary Office either had no detectable residues at all, or contained quantities so minute that they do not pose any risk.

EU legislation on pesticides, or “plant protection products”, strictly regulates which pesticides, insecticides, fungicides, etc. can be used and how. In 1991, the EU decided that it would check all the products being used in Member States and either authorise them for use throughout the EU, or require that they be taken off the market, depending on the outcome of each assessment.

There are also EU laws that limit how much of a plant protection product may remain in fruit and vegetables, cereals, and foods of animal and plant origin. These laws set so-called “maximum residue limits” which are established from evaluation of data on critical good agricultural practice (the actual or proposed authorised uses) and data from the prescribed residue trials. They are in fact, much stricter than toxicological limits set by scientists. To be sure that the safe legal levels are respected, however, the EU carries out regular monitoring and reporting programmes, such as the one mentioned in the first paragraph.

Now, the European Commission is proposing to update some of the legislation relating to the use of plant protection products in the EU. Since 1991, it has become apparent that the 2003 deadline for assessing all the substances being used in plant protection products could not be met. Therefore, the Commission is proposing to extend the deadline to 2008 and to introduce “fast-track” procedures for substances where the decision to authorise or withdraw is clear. Since the EU’s new and independent food safety agency, the European Food Safety Authority is now up and running, it will be involved in reviewing assessments and recommending action. The Commission is also assessing “new” substances put on the market since the 1991 rules were adopted.

Up to now, national authorities could set a residue limit for products marketed in their own countries, if there was no EU limit. However, national differences have caused minor trade disputes in the past because products manufactured in one EU country could not be sold in others with stricter restrictions. This is contrary to the idea of a single European market, where goods and services move freely from one country

to another.

Therefore, the European Commission has proposed that residues of products not checked out at EU level should not exceed 0.01 milligrams per kilogram of food. As scientific assessments of products are completed, the EU will set all legal limits in a single legislative text.

Therefore, as long as products that protect plants from disease and hungry bugs are used carefully and in compliance with the law, consumers can continue to enjoy plentiful supplies of nutritious food without unwanted levels of chemicals.