



School Pesticide Monitor

A Bi-Monthly Bulletin on Pesticides and Alternatives
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GAO Report Sounds Alarm Again on Poor Pesticide Controls

A new Government Accountability (GAO) report finds that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not test food for several commonly used pesticides with established tolerance levels –including glyphosate, one of the most commonly used pesticides in the U.S. This and other disturbing findings documented in GAO’s report, *Food Safety: FDA and USDA Should Strengthen Pesticide Residue Monitoring Programs and Further Disclose Monitoring Limitations*, issued in early November, sounds an alarm that GAO began sounding in the 1980’s in several reports that identify shocking limitations of FDA’s approach

to monitoring for pesticide residue violations in food.

GAO sharply criticizes FDA for not using statistically valid methods consistent with Office of Management and Budget (OMB) standards to collect information on the incidence and level of pesticide residues. In fact, GAO states that it “was unable to find publicly available estimates of the overall toxicity or risk associated with the use of agricultural pesticides in the United States.” According to GAO, FDA is testing less than one-tenth of one percent of all imported fruits and vegetables and less than 1 percent of domestic fruits and vegetables. The

report is also critical of U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) testing, finding limitations in its data.

Among its new findings, the report found that not only does FDA not disclose what pesticides it does not test for, but the multiresidue methods that it uses cannot detect all pesticides with established tolerances, including six of the most commonly used pesticides in the U.S.: glyphosate, 2,4-D, MCPA, mancozeb, paraquat, and methyl bromide.

Glyphosate is one of the most popular weedkillers in both the U.S. and

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USDA Reports Pesticide Residues on Over Half of Food Tested

Riding at the heels of the GAO report, USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) has posted a report on its data from the 2013 Pesticide Data Program (PDP) Annual Summary, concluding that although over half of the food tested by the agency for pesticide residues last year showed detectable levels of pesticides, these levels are below the tolerances established by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and do not pose a safety concern. However, according to Beyond Pesticides, the residues reflect a pesticide use and exposure pattern that raises hazard scenarios that are not fully evaluated by EPA for chemical mixtures, synergistic effects, impacts on people and envi-

ronments with high risk factors, and certain critical health endpoints, such as endocrine disruption.

Excluding water, of the 9,990 samples analyzed, 23.5 percent had one pesticide detected and 36 percent had more than one pesticide. Residues exceeding tolerances were detected in 0.23 percent (23 samples out of 9,990) of the samples tested. Of these 23 samples, 17 were imported and 6 were domestic. Residues with no established tolerances were found in 3.0 percent of samples, of which 50.2 percent were domestic and 49.2 percent imported.

According to USDA, “The Pesticide Data Program provides reliable data

through rigorous sampling that helps assure consumers that the produce they feed their families is safe. Over 99 percent of the products sampled through PDP had residues below the EPA tolerances.”

The assertion that pesticides in the U.S. food supply do not pose safety concerns rests on shaky ground, according to GAO’s recent findings. In addition, the effects of pesticide exposure have been well documented, particularly for vulnerable segments of the population like children and pregnant women. In 2012, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) weighed

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GAO Report

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the world and also the active ingredient in Roundup —the leading glyphosate product developed by Monsanto. Known as “Roundup Ready,” Genetically engineered (GE) soybeans, corn, cotton, and other crops have been genetically altered and patented by Monsanto to be glyphosate-tolerant.

FDA officials cited two reasons that it does not test for glyphosate. First, officials stated that if present in genetically engineered (GE) corn and soybeans, glyphosate levels are likely to be reduced by the processing done to those foods. Second, according to the agency, the total start-up cost to implement selective residue methods for glyphosate at its six testing laboratories would be approximately \$5 million.

According to FDA officials, testing for 2,4-D would also require a selective residue method that would cost approximately \$5 million to implement throughout its laboratories. FDA officials stated that, while the agency does not test for 2,4-D in its pesticide monitoring program, it does test for them in its Total Diet Study. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has established for dozens of food or animal feed commodities. According to agency officials, its Total Diet Study testing has detected 2,4-D at low levels (below 5 parts per billion) in selected food items. However, as has occurred with glyphosate, the use of 2,4-D may increase if USDA deregulates the production of corn and soybeans genetically engineered to tolerate being sprayed with this herbicide.

The documented adverse effects of 2,4-D, a chlorophenoxy herbicide, are plentiful and include human health risks of soft tissue sarcoma, non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, neurotoxicity, kidney/liver damage, and harm to the reproductive system. EPA’s own research

suggests that babies born in counties where high rates of chlorophenoxy herbicides are applied to farm fields are significantly more likely to be born with birth defects of the respiratory and circulatory systems, as well as defects of the musculoskeletal system like clubfoot, fused digits, and extra digits. These birth defects are 60-90% more likely in counties with higher 2,4-D application rates. The results also show a higher likelihood of birth defects in babies conceived in the spring, when herbicide application rates peak.

According to the *Washington Post*, the GAO review of the pesticide program was requested by Rep. Paul Tonko, (D-N.Y.), who said the results concerned him and urged the agencies to follow the recommendations of the federal auditors. “GAO’s report indicates that the monitoring programs used by FDA and FSIS are falling short of their objectives. Improvements are needed in pesticide residue monitoring,” Rep. Tonko told the paper, adding that both agencies “will need to devote more resources to pesticide residue monitoring to implement GAO’s recommendations.”

This is not the first time GAO has found that pesticide testing is inadequate. In 1997 testimony before Congress, Federal Regulation of Pesticide Residues In Food, GAO stated, “...because of the limited amount of food that FDA is able to test for pesticide residues, it is important that FDA’s monitoring program acts as a strong deterrent against the shipment of food containing pesticide residues that render the food adulterated. Our reviews of FDA’s pesticide monitoring program show that this is not the case.”

The serious limitations in protecting the public from pesticide exposure – even to levels identified by EPA as allowing an “acceptable” rate of harm based on controversial risk assessment calculations– gave important support to Beyond Pesticides’ efforts to ad-

vance organic food production and a national certification system that have stronger oversight and rigor than the pesticide regulatory standards that had and continue to fail the public. Organic foods have been shown to reduce dietary pesticide exposure and children who eat a conventional diet of food produced with chemical-intensive practices carry residues of organophosphate pesticides that are reduced or eliminated when they switch to an organic diet. Beyond the impacts that residues of pesticides have on people who eat food grown with chemical-intensive practices, the pesticides used in conventional food production can also have devastating impacts where they are used, poison farmworkers, and cause cancer, Parkinson’s, and other chronic diseases in rural communities. Children of farmworkers are also at elevated risk.

Residues

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in on the organic food debate recognizing that lower pesticide residues in organic foods may be significant for children. The Academy also noted that choosing organic is based on larger environmental issues, as well as human health impacts like pollution and global climate change, a standpoint that is supported by Beyond Pesticides. AAP subsequently released a landmark policy statement, Pesticide Exposure in Children, on the effects of pesticide exposure in children. AAP’s statement notes that, “Children encounter pesticides daily and have unique susceptibilities to their potential toxicity.”

For more information on the health effects of pesticide exposure, see Beyond Pesticides’ Pesticide-Induced Diseases Database at www.beyondpesticides.org/health. To learn more about pesticides and the foods you eat, see Beyond Pesticides’ Eating with a Conscience at www.EatingWithAConscience.org.