

Consumers Drive Marketplace Change, Regulators Follow Triclosan removed from soaps long before FDA ban

When we found out on a Friday afternoon in early September that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) was banning triclosan and 18 other antimicrobial products in liquid soaps, my reaction was –it’s about time. In 2004, with our publication of *The Ubiquitous Triclosan*, we had started working on the issue of a harmful pesticide in consumer products that offered virtually no benefit, but caused cross resistance with antibiotics and contaminated water and soil, and is now found in 75% of the U.S. population. Back then, the chemical was just exploding on to the market. I first saw it in a grocery store in a dishwashing sponge and thought, “This can’t be.” The craze for an antiseptic environment fueled the market for the chemical. We now see it in toothpaste, and various textiles, including underwear and socks, in hairbrushes, cutting boards, computer keyboards, and children’s plastic toys. For me, it symbolizes everything that is wrong with the allowance of pesticides in the market –known hazards and unnecessary (no efficacy), but driven by market forces and a regulatory agency that does not challenge the continuous introduction of toxic chemicals that we don’t need and are hurting us and the environment.

Need, Voice, Action

As we advance organic as the solution to pollution, triclosan serves as a model for how we confront the pesticide problem on many levels. First, it exemplifies the fact that we don’t need hazardous synthetic pesticides. The experience can be applied more broadly to chemical-intensive agriculture. Organic systems eliminate the need for synthetic fertilizers by establishing practices that partner with nature, cycle nutrients naturally, and create resilient plants. Second, it shows that our voice will be heard if we persist in elevating it. The media may not hear the message for years, however, we continue to show that organic systems are extraordinarily productive and even more profitable than conventional. Land managers of parks and playing fields that may have said that we can’t manage land with organic principles are learning that we can. City and town councils, once deferential to state and federal inaction, are adopting policies that require a transition away from toxic chemical inputs. Operating under the radar, we excluded genetically modified organisms from organic standards, knowing that the systems were antithetical to sound ecological practices and would result in increased pesticide use resulting from weed and insect resistance. That was in 2000 when our voices were ignored and now in 2016 a front page article in *The New York Times* proclaims “Genetically Modified Crops Have Failed to Lift Yields and Ease Pesticide Use.” Third, it teaches us that expedited change requires extraordinary public pressure, that waiting for federal regulators and policy makers to catch up is not the single solution. They are behind the curve, too slow to effect change in a timely way, and typically responsive to the urgency of looming environmental threats. A dozen years after we petitioned FDA to act to ban triclosan from soap, it did.

Taking it to the market

Triclosan teaches us to elevate public awareness and a marketplace of alternatives. Since we are not sitting around waiting for regulators

and policy makers to act, our campaign in the marketplace, along with others, had already removed most of the triclosan from liquid soaps. The major manufacturers, one by one, removed the chemical as the public became aware of its dangers. And, we still have more work to do on this. Yes, it’s out of soap, but it is in some toothpaste and many non-cosmetic products that are regulated by EPA. Again, we have to use the marketplace to express our dislike for the chemical and the contamination that it causes, forcing it off the market. The book *10% Human: How your body’s microbes hold the key to health and happiness*, reviewed in this issue, helps to give perspective to triclosan and the importance of those organisms in our bodies, just as *The Soil Will Save Us*, reviewed previously, explains the importance of microbes in the soil.

Engaging organic

Our article on engaging USDA on organic is a critical piece that explains the importance of the level at which we need to get involved with organic standard setting, lest industrial agriculture and big food manufacturers ultimately control organic. We still have a law in the OFPA that we need to protect, use, and apply to growing the organic sector with our core values and principles.

The season of mosquitoes and Zika

This has been the season of mosquitoes with the fear of the Zika virus driving communities to spray their residents with none other than organophosphate pesticides. Those are the chemicals that we were told were too dangerous to use around our children at our homes and schools, but are now being sprayed over children, elderly and the infirm to protect us from Zika. In this issue, we seek transparency on hazards, uncertainties, and alternatives to support informed local decisions.

Another community moves to organic on public and private land

South Portland, Maine is the latest community to ban the cosmetic use of pesticides on private and public property in its city. The community engaged in the thoughtful review of the situation, began to understand the hazards, the uncertainties, the limitations of the regulatory process, and the efficacy of organic land management practices. Then, the elected officials took the right step. Now we are *Mapping the Movement to Sustainable Communities*. So check out the map in this issue and get your community listed. Let us know how we can help organize a hearing before your city or town council, bring in the experts, share the experiences from other communities, and adopt a policy that transitions your town to organic land management practices.



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