

Subject: Pesticides - Regulatory goals and directions

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Below I quote the above subject section from a paper (see <http://pmep.cce.cornell.edu/facts-slides-self/facts/gen-pubre-carcin-wilkinson.html>)

by Chris F. Wilkinson, Department of Entomology, Cornell University

It should be useful for policy makers.

Corrie Kost

The development of a sound regulatory policy that not only protects the public against the potentially adverse health effects of chemicals but also creates the incentive for industry to develop new materials of real benefit to society is, indeed, a difficult task. It is particularly difficult when, as is almost always the case today, the major focus of concern is cancer.

Despite the fact that there is no epidemic of human cancer in the United States and despite the fact that, of the cancer that does occur, only a very small percentage can be attributed to synthetic chemicals, we continue to pour billions of dollars worth of time, effort, and resources into attempts to identify carcinogens. Hindered by the scarcity and uncertainty of the science and complicated by the inevitable involvement of policy and value judgments, the results of such efforts are seldom clear-cut or cost-effective.

The current obsession for regulating carcinogenic risk in the United States seems to be based more on the public's perception of risk and fear of cancer than on risks that actually can be demonstrated. We are caught up in a vicious circle in which, in attempting to respond to public pressure, regulators are focusing on and identifying increasingly smaller risks that in turn further alarm the public and create yet more pressure to regulate. We seem unable, in a regulatory sense, to distinguish toxicological trivia from more clear-cut problems, and as a society we spend our time worrying about cancer risks that are orders of magnitude smaller than those risks most of us face driving to work each day.

Surely the time has come to pause and take serious stock of our regulatory goals and directions. We have limited resources, and we must concentrate these on resolving real problems that require immediate attention. Despite the inherent difficulties it entails, we must address the issue of what constitutes a significant health risk; in developing policy, we must balance this against what we as a nation can afford in terms of remedial action to reduce risks. We cannot afford to go blindly along, throwing large amounts of money into attempts to resolve imaginary problems. Instead, we must carefully identify and rank the areas of real health concern and develop appropriate strategies by which the associated risks can be avoided or minimized.

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