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Pesticides

Are consumers protected by the government?

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Pesticide-laced watermelons from California, blamed for sickening nearly 300 people in five states, show the potential hazard of such residues and the federal government is failing to protect consumers adequately, a critic says.

But federal officials defend their regulation of food-borne residues from the 800 million pounds of pesticide farmers use every year. And they say consumers should not be alarmed.

"Consumers cannot blindly trust the government in terms of providing them a safe food supply," free of immediate and long-term hazards from pesticide residues, says Lawrie Mott of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

One concern is the so-called "data gap." The Environmental Protection Agency, which sets limits on pesticide residues in food, lacks complete health and safety information on most of the 600 active pesticide ingredients now allowed. Only about 300 ingredients are used in agriculture, according to FDA; the rest are used in hospitals and elsewhere.

The data gap appeared because EPA's information requirements have expanded greatly since many of the chemicals were approved. EPA files on most of the chemicals haven't yet caught up with current requirements.

So EPA doesn't know all it should about potential harm from pesticides on the market, says Mott. And the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's testing of foods for residues overlooks those from many ap-



proved pesticides, she says.

Regulatory officials say there's more to the story.

EPA is working on getting up-to-date information on pesticide ingredients, starting with the major chemicals used in food production, says Jim Roelofs of EPA's pesticide program.

But it can take years for a study on cancer or birth defects to be completed after EPA asks a chemical company for it.

"For a lot of chemicals, there are still studies under way," he says.

So far, EPA has re-approved only a few chemicals after getting up-to-date files. It has completed an elaborate review of 100 chemicals, which includes reassessing residue limits and asking companies for further studies, Roelofs says. The process should cover 25 more chemicals each year.

"The magnitude of the task is gigantic," Roelofs says.

Information on a single pesticide can fill a four-drawer file, says EPA spokesman Al Heier.

To enforce EPA residue limits on food sold across state lines, the FDA typically tests 10,000 to 12,000 food

shipments a year, including imports, says John Wessel, director of FDA's contaminants policy staff.

Meat and poultry shipments are handled by the federal Agriculture Department, he says.

FDA checks cover a variety of food types with emphasis on common foods like major fruits and vegetables, and those most likely to contain residues, Wessel says.

FDA tests can detect up to 150 kinds of residue at once, but it can't test for all pesticides in each shipment, he says.

It chooses tests on the basis of pesticide use among various crops and the potential for hazard from residues, Wessel says. Some pesticides leave only innocuous traces, and others none at all.

Produce from farmers who follow instructions on pesticide labels nearly always meets the standards, Wessel says.

FDA can get court orders to seize unacceptable food. It also can ask state authorities to hold shipments, and recipients of tainted food — such as grocery store chains and food processors — will generally hold or destroy it voluntarily, he says.

The food supply overall is safe, Wessel says. FDA finds violations in 2 percent to 3 percent of the shipments it tests, mostly traces of pesticide in a crop for which the chemical is not approved.

EPA's Roelofs says last year's discovery of a cancer-causing grain fumigant called EDB in grain products shows what can go wrong.

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.45 cts.	995	535
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