

❖ FARM FORUM ❖

(Continued from Page A10) (the farming side) is made up of the hard-working, responsible conservationists who grow our food. (Higher crop yields have saved 15 million square miles of wildlands from being plowed for crops.) Let's further suppose, for the sake of argument, that the other side (let's call them eco-zealots, just to pull a label out of thin air) are certified, off-the-wall extremists.

If you, as a regulator, keep splitting the difference in a debate between responsible pesticide users and shouting ban-them-all demonstrators, you will gradually veer toward banning everything. You will eventually deprive your farmers of the key

inputs needed to protect your food against bugs, bacteria, and weeds. That will ultimately force you to either starve millions of people, or plow down millions of acres of wildlands for low-yield crops.

Soil erosion has been the Achilles heel of civilization for the 10,000 years since we learned to farm. (Before that, our weakness was a tendency to kill all the game in the area and then start a war over hunting rights with the tribe next door.)

In the last 25 years, we solved the erosion problem with a system called conservation tillage. Conservation tillage uses crop residue to protect the soil structure and cuts soil erosion

by up to 90 percent. Instead of burying weed seeds with the moldboard plowing that used to invite wind and water erosion, it uses herbicides to control weeds. The U.S. Society for Soil and Water Conservation noted that conservation tillage is a key part of "the most sustainable farming in human history."

Atrazine is the most flexible and cost-effective herbicide for conservation tillage. It's been used for decades, in at least 80 countries, on all sorts of terrain and circumstances, with no discovered health or environmental side effects.

The eco-zealots target atrazine because traces of it are often occasionally found in our groundwater. They make the usual cancer allegation. But the EPA itself recently reclassified atrazine as "not likely to be carcinogenic to humans." This echoes an earlier decision by the International Agency for Research on Cancer, which says atrazine cannot be classified as a

carcinogen. That essentially means that atrazine is safer than the chlorine we use to purify our drinking water. Chlorine actually does cause tumors in rats at high doses. But it also kills the bacteria that would otherwise kill us.

Paracelsus 500 years ago laid down the basic rule of toxicology: "The dose makes the poison." Almost everything is dangerous at high levels, including table salt. Almost nothing is dangerous at low levels.

The U.S. permits only a tiny amount of atrazine in drinking water: 3 parts per billion (ppb) (That's like three aspirin tablets in an Olympic-sized swimming pool.) Great Britain allows 15 ppb. Australia has set the limit at 20 ppb. The French Minister of Agriculture has banned it — but that's a political gesture. He offers no evidence that atrazine is not safe.

The EPA has come up with a couple of pretty far-fetched accusations in its latest round of atrazine musings:

A. Atrazine may disrupt the homing instincts of salmon. (Sci-

ence doesn't give much credit for "may," and salmon are exposed to virtually no atrazine.)

B. "Continued atrazine use is likely to pose a risk to health and integrity of some aquatic communities." (A single study claimed atrazine would kill the underwater weeds on which some marine creatures feed; but an independent scientific panel concluded "The inferred effects . . . cannot be confirmed from the published data, and were discounted in subsequent publications by the same researchers.")

All of this sounds like a pretty thin basis for banning restricting one of our most important conservation tools. Especially since the same eco-zealots who want to ban atrazine are defending a widely-used organic pesticide — pyrethrum — which an EPA science panel has classified as "a likely human carcinogen."


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