

Protests Lack of Pesticide Regulation - LTE *Sierra Vista Herald* (17 March 1978)

(N.B. This LTE was titled “Protests Mexican Pesticides” by the *Herald*, either deliberately or carelessly utterly changing the intent of my letter, which is recaptured in the title here)

The point our striking farmers make concerning the use of pesticides on Mexican produce is well taken. Many Mexican crops, many crops all over the world, are treated with American-made chemicals whose use or is now illegal or restricted in the United States.

And a great percentage of vegetables and fruits imported to this country, especially during winter months, do come from Latin American countries where the use of pesticides is restricted only by the budget of the grower.

What’s worse, finding out which crops are treated with which poisons is early impossible without first-hand inspection of farms. My letters to various government in the United States and Mexico over the past three years regarding these questions have gone unanswered.

This should not surprise us when we realize that even in this country no official records are kept on the kind or amounts of even the most toxic substances sprayed on a given piece of land. About the only way to find out what a plane is spraying on nearby fields is to ask the pilot or grower. The state Board of Pesticide Control and the County Extension Agent can tell how much was sold to distributors and how many pounds to registered applicators and how much money was involved, but no one (except maybe individual pilots and growers) is keeping track of which poison is put in what amount and manner on which land.

And due to a similar flaw in the regulations governing pesticide use in this country, not only Mexican farmers but your next door neighbor might be spraying the deadliest of chemicals without either of you knowing it. This results from an agreement between manufacturers and the government that pesticides, unlike medical drugs, are considered innocent until proven guilty.

There is no law that requires manufacturers and sellers to guarantee the safety of their products before distribution. The law requires only that the products be effective when used according to the instructions on the label. Their effects on non-target species (like human beings, wildlife and ecosystems) are often discovered only after a series of disasters in the field. Only then is it determined that label instructions were not or could not be followed, or that some hitherto untested effect is at fault.

The process has been seen repeatedly in this country: inadequate testing leads first to widespread human poisoning and then to belated restriction or cancellation of registration, despite the protests of manufacturers that the [roducts are safe if used according to instructions and the outcries of farmers hooked on chemicals and having trouble kicking the habit.

The solutions to these problems are clear. The sale and manufacture of potential environmental pollutants —especially agricultural chemicals — must be regulated much more closely than even the latest EPA registration procedures call for. No product should be allowed into the

marketplace or environment until it has been exhaustively tested for health hazards and found safe by stiff government standards.

The EPA, USDA and Public Health Service should cooperate to establish a nationwide network of community-level pesticide information and emergency programs to inform the public of pesticide dangers, to thoroughly test for contamination, and to treat poisoned people and land. The facilities for accomplishing these goals are at present rudimentary and entirely inadequate.

The Departments of Commerce and State should ban the import and transport of all products treated with chemicals illegal in this country or which contain residues exceeding the amounts allowed here.

The forest and agricultural industries should develop, with strong financial encouragement from the government, alternative methods which do not require the use of energy-intensive poisons.

Only by the adoption of such guidelines can we guarantee our freedom not to be poisoned against our will by South, Central and North American farmers.