

# Hiltrud Breyer MEP

## Policy in Europe

### **The new way forward for pesticide authorisations: a win-win situation for all**

Position paper by Hiltrud Breyer MEP

On 23 October 2007 the European Parliament voted at first reading on the new way forward for pesticide authorisations in Europe, one of the most important environmental and consumer protection policy initiatives of this parliamentary term. The vote was a milestone not only for environmental protection and health in Europe but also for the competitiveness of the economy. The European Parliament emphasised that people throughout Europe have to be given better protection against dangerous pesticides. The new way forward for pesticide authorisations, with definite bans on highly dangerous substances, clear-cut rules for the substitution of toxic pesticides, and substantial improvements in transparency for consumers, is a win-win situation for all and makes Europe a stronger industrial and commercial base in the long term.

The absolute lack of acceptance on the part of the chemical industry and agricultural lobby, which is completely resistant to any change in the EU pesticide authorisation system, is therefore short-sighted and absurd. The European Union is not in imminent danger of a food shortage and famine; it is embarking on a long overdue change of direction in its pesticides policy.

Consumers expect the European Union to provide them with adequate protection against dangerous pesticides. Too often their enjoyment of a strawberry or an apple is spoilt if, as so often happens, dangerous pesticide residues are detected in what they are eating. According to a Eurobarometer survey, pesticide residues are the food issue of greatest concern to Europeans, ahead even of food hygiene or GM products. The boom in organic products in Europe and the success of pesticides campaigns, such as the Greenpeace Germany campaign, highlight the fact that consumers want goods that are free from pesticides. The large German supermarket chains have responded and have stepped up their checks or tightened up their pesticide limit values. The new pesticides regulation will restore consumer confidence in food safety.

To say that pesticides have no harmful effects of any kind on man, animals and the environment if the products are used properly is an old wives' tale. Pesticides are, by definition, dangerous chemicals. They are particularly dangerous when different pesticides are used in combination; the damage such combinations can cause has, in many instances, not been adequately investigated as yet. The trail of damage which the persistent chemical DDT left in its wake, accumulating as it does in animal and human fatty tissue and being passed on to the next generation through the food chain, should be sufficient warning to us all. DDT is not the only pesticide still found in food and the environment years after it was banned.

Pesticides continue on their journey undeterred by borders. So far, however, the European Union has been unsuccessful in providing protection against dangerous pesticides, since it has failed to achieve its aim of over ten years ago of bringing about a considerable reduction in the use of pesticides. Although the active ingredients can

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be used in ever decreasing quantities, consumption Europe-wide has increased still further. Every year just under 300 000 tonnes of pesticides are applied in the EU, the majority of this volume going on food production.

As rapporteur on pesticide authorisations for the European Parliament's Environment Committee, I support improvements in protection against dangerous pesticides, an increase in transparency for consumers, and the safeguarding of the high environmental standards of the EU Member States. The European Parliament has given me its broad support for this issue.

## **Reform of the pesticide authorisation system: the main demands of the European Parliament - rapporteur Hiltrud Breyer -**

### **1. Abolition of dangerous pesticides**

The present pesticide authorisation system shows scant regard for the avoidance of environmental and health risks. Usually it is a case of locking the stable door after the horse has bolted. In other words, the assessment of potential risks comes after the authorisation. This game of cat and mouse is played out to the detriment of consumer health. There are pesticides which, on the basis of the precautionary principle, should not be authorised in Europe at all. These include pesticides which are highly persistent, which accumulate in the environment and in organisms and which exhibit toxic effects there (PBT chemicals), and also those which are carcinogenic, mutagenic and toxic to reproduction (CMR pesticides).

The European Parliament is calling for the following:

- The clear-cut exclusion of CMR pesticides and of those that damage the hormone system. Only 4.5% of all 507 active ingredients authorised in Europe would be affected by this ban.
- The additional abolition of pesticides that have immunotoxic and neurotoxic effects.
- Greater consideration of combined effects. There is certainly still a need for improvement here, since this cannot be allowed to hang fire until the relevant test methods are available.

### **2. Substitution as a win-win situation**

The application of the substitution principle, which also features in the EU Chemicals Regulation (REACH), is a crucial step towards better health in Europe and also for the economy. After all, substitution is something that boosts competition in the chemical industry. It is scandalous to sound warnings that up to half of all pesticides could disappear from the market.

The European Commission applied strict criteria for substitution:

1. the alternative must be a distinctly lower risk to health and the environment (factor 10);
2. the effect on the target organism must be comparable; and
3. there must be no economic and practical disadvantages for users.

This is what the European Parliament is calling for:

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- The Members of the House have strengthened the substitution principle: pesticides which are 'candidates for substitution' are to be authorised for a maximum of five years rather than for seven years as proposed by the European Commission.

### 3. Better protection of vulnerable groups

Foetuses, babies and children are particularly vulnerable to the harmful effects of dangerous chemicals. Their brain is still in the crucial hormone-controlled development stages, and these groups absorb more pesticides as a result of their larger respiratory volume, greater skin contact and higher feed intake. EU Directive 2006/215/EC specifies a strict maximum limit value for residues in infant and baby food. If parents feed their children fresh fruit and vegetables, however, this value is exceeded up to 200-fold.

The European Parliament decided that:

- The authorisation of active ingredients and their risk assessment should be geared to the vulnerable groups in society. To put it more plainly: if a harmful effect is to be expected in an infant, this active ingredient must not be authorised.
- Foods not complying with Directive 2006/215/EC must be labelled 'Not suitable for children'.

### 4. More transparency for consumers and people living in proximity

Consumers have the right to safe food and clean water. They must be able to pursue policy with their shopping basket. The authorisation and use of pesticides must not therefore be a closed book. We are not talking about giving away trade secrets but about safeguarding the consumer's right to information. People living in proximity must be told before toxic spray mist starts to drift through their living rooms. There should be no more having to peer through a fog of confusion when we come to the issue of traceability. Pesticides cannot be allowed to be the only travellers that do not need a passport and that end up on our plates at toxic levels.

The European Parliament is calling for the following:

- A pesticide passport should be introduced for the wholesale trade and for retail outlets, thus making it possible to trace which pesticide was used when. That will boost competition for healthy food, and it guarantees traceability back through the food chain.
- The Member States should decide whether people living in proximity and parties affected are informed before pesticides are applied.
- Reports, lists of authorised pesticides, and toxicological and ecotoxicological data should be available to all on the Internet.

In the course of the negotiations for the second reading in the coming months, I shall call for improvements in access to important data and information prior to spraying.

### 5. Safeguarding high environmental protection standards

The European Commission is calling for a major modification in the form of a zonal authorisation for pesticide products that is intended to replace existing national decisions. The proposed division of Europe into three zones is not based on any

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environmental or climatic criteria or on landscape types. Requiring an EU Member State to relinquish its decision on a pesticide authorisation to another country – not to the EU as a whole – without any real opportunity for objection is inconsistent with the principle of subsidiarity.

The European Parliament decided as follows:

- Europe should not be divided into three zones, but national authorisations should be retained with precisely specified deadlines;
- environmental protection should be stepped up: substances that are on the list of priority substances which present a significant risk under the Water Framework Directive must not be authorised;
- substances must not be toxic to bees;
- the number of animal tests should be reduced and a central database created to prevent the duplication of animal tests.

## **No poison in the shopping trolley**

To guarantee human and environmental safety there is a need for improvement not only in the authorisation system but also in the application of pesticides.

The Sixth Environment Action Programme of the European Community calls for a significant reduction in pesticides. Unfortunately, there was not solid support for specific reduction targets of 25% and 50% in the vote on the directive on the use of pesticides. The EU Member States are already a step ahead. Denmark is a shining example of how an ambitious pesticide reduction policy can be put into practice since, as a result of national action plans with specific targets, Danish farmers are now using only half the pesticides they were using twenty years ago.

Through the regulation on authorisations and the directive on the sustainable use of pesticides the European Parliament now has a unique opportunity to set a systematic reversal in agriculture in motion, away from a heavy dependence on toxic pesticides towards the use of only small amounts of chemical active ingredients, if any. The mandatory introduction of Integrated Pest Management (IPM), with its guidelines for sustainable planting and cultivation, must not continue to be put off.

It is high time for pesticides to be made safe! I am hoping for the support of the EU Member States, which will adopt their position on pesticide authorisations in May.

People's confidence in Europe will grow only if they see that their interests are taken seriously in the European Union. I am pleased that, with the new pesticides regulation, we are on the verge of major new breakthroughs in health and environmental protection.

Further information on this subject available from:

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