

The Risk-Monger





I'm not selling anything. Which statement is more likely correct? 1) Pesticides are positive for the environment. 2) Pesticides are negative for the environment. 'Silent Spring' will provide some clues if necessary



The Risk-Monger
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Replying to

Your perspective is a bit off. Try from this angle.

Agriculture is negative for the environment. But as we cannot go back to gathering wild berries, how can we make it more sustainable?

By reducing crop losses, land conversion and soil depletion, I would vote for more agri-tech.

Are Pesticides Good or Bad ?

Posted by [RISKMONGER](#) on [FEBRUARY 19, 2018](#)

A mildly provoked twitter follower asked me the other day: Are pesticides positive for the environment or negative for the environment? As it was rather difficult to reply within 280 characters, here is my extended answer to an “obvious” question that really should not be asked in a mature discussion.

I always wince when Saint Rachel is evoked.

We need to reframe the question. It is not a matter of whether pesticides are good or bad for the environment but rather, we should ask: Is agriculture good or bad for the environment?

Insofar as we can no longer survive by hunting or gathering berries; insofar as agriculture involves cultivating meadows and forests; insofar as we need to irrigate and fertilise to produce more food to satisfy a growing population; it is obvious that agriculture is bad for the environment.

So the challenge becomes: How can we develop agriculture in a way that puts less strain on the environment.

Until the 1950s, acquiring land, cutting down forests and applying more manual labour (usually children) were the solutions to feeding growing populations. For the last 70 years though, better land use, proper soil and water management and agritech have been the solutions. If you can increase yields (producing more food from less land), limit inputs and labour, then agriculture would have less of an environmental impact.

Pesticides are a valuable precautionary tool in the sustainable agriculture strategy – reducing yield loss by preventing or limiting pest outbreaks, moulds or competition for soil nutrients. Like any innovation, the original chemicals in the 1950s were quite harsh, but over time toxicity and exposure levels were reduced and refined. Sadly, many critics of agritech focus on those first pesticides even though they are now decades off the market.

As agricultural challenges evolved in the last decade (fewer farmers, climate stresses, water issues and soil depletion), pesticides also evolved to help keep agriculture from excessively stressing the environment via tools like herbicide-resistant seeds, conservation ag, seed treatments and precision agriculture. The agritech developments have been impressive in creating more sustainable farming practices and innovations in the crop protection field have been an important solution to these problems.

The short answer to a question which should never have been asked is: Yes, pesticides have been good for the environment ... very good.

Which is why I am mystified when naïve politicians like Emmanuel Macron mimic his activist advisers and call for a new approach to farming (assumedly without any pesticides). For Macron, pesticides are bad (at least that's what his polling tells him today). But how will farming be better if he abandons agritech solutions

without understanding the problem? I fear the tragic context for French farmers will only worsen.

The “Bad” Answer

In rejecting agritech (willfully denying present seed innovations, pesticides and fertilisers), the organic lobby is leaving us with the pre-1950s alternative of clearing more land, finding more manual inputs while producing and consuming less. Perhaps we eat too much meat, but shouldn't that be a personal decision and not one thrust on us out of necessity? And who are we to decide this question for citizens of emerging markets (whose leaders merely force copy-pasted EU luxury legislation onto their smallholders)?

Perhaps I am getting long in the tooth, but I have seen too many cases of people reacting against solutions without understanding the sources of the problems, of people failing to ask proper questions and of people in power who have lost the capacity (and humility) to listen. The EU glyphosate process was a watershed for such stupidity. Having our debates funneled into social media echo chambers has made this situation even worse since the capacity for critical thinking can only suffer under the weight of such ignorant confirmation bias. Europeans are asking a question on pesticides that reflects an intellectual immaturity.

Those in the EU who pretend to lead policy assume pesticides are bad and are seeking to fix the “problem” in a precautionary manner (take them all off the market). For some, like José Bové, the answer is obvious and navel-driven: French farmers, he says, must concentrate only on feeding the French. As Europeans voluntarily move away from the agritech solutions, yields will go down and global diets will need to adapt.

Nobody seems to be contesting lower yields as part of the new solution, but will loud western mouths then demand that silent southern farmers fill their bellies? Without crop protection tools, smallholders in developing countries are lucky if they can grow enough to feed their own families let alone their villages. What will happen when market forces lead these poor farmers to grow organic food for European consumers. They will suffer before us, but under this new “agricultural paradigm”, we will no doubt suffer without them.

So back to the question: Are pesticides good or bad? A person who asks such a question no doubt thinks he or she has good intentions ... but the consequences

of thinking pesticides aren't good, the way the opportunistic organic lobby is framing it, are far too bad to fathom. Isn't it time to ask a better question?



Is this really the "good" answer?