

False advertising

National Post
July 23, 2004
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As anyone who follows politics knows, negative campaigns work. But in no way are they limited to elections. Since the early 1970s, beneficial crop protection products (CPPs) like pesticides and herbicides, which underpin the Prairie economy, have faced a continual onslaught of misleading and blatantly false accusations by environmental groups.

CPPs have been accused of causing everything from neurological damage and deadly cancers to limb deformities in fetuses -- all of which is a load of bunk. After 50 years and billions of dollars worth of research, testing and retesting from every imaginable angle, no one has produced sound toxicological or epidemiological evidence to support such speculation.

This past April, Ontario's College of Family Physicians --a small, radical group -- issued a report intended to reinforce negative public stereotypes about chemicals. It was based on a "Meta-analysis" -- a study of other studies, which is notoriously difficult to do with any degree of accuracy, and which inevitably leads to evidence that does not support predetermined outcomes being discarded. "Metas" are a mainstay of the traffickers in junk science.

A few days after its release, Joe Comartin, an NDP MP from Windsor, Ont., insisted in Parliament that this "report" provided unquestionable scientific proof that chemicals are killing us and that the federal government should immediately ban their use. A shortsighted, reckless "solution" of this sort completely ignores the countless useful, proven benefits CPPs bring to our food supply, the environment, farmers and the economy.

Growing food entails numerous variables and risks. In addition to the obvious problems of weather, the obstacles include a myriad of natural competitors. Farmers are in a constant battle against root rot, insects, fungi, moulds, blights and other plant diseases, as well as weeds that rob planted crops of nutrients, moisture and sunshine.

Chemical science has provided tools to control these problems safely. The consequent increases in productivity and efficiency have created an astounding abundance unprecedented in human history. Growing more food per acre has brought adequate, affordable nutrition to the poorest people without plowing under more land.

A ban on CPPs would collapse Canada's already battered farming sector, concentrated in the Prairies, which is already reeling from low grain prices and the BSE-induced crash of the beef industry. Croplife Canada estimates that a chemical ban would reduce productivity by 40% and raise costs by 30%.

But the most recent study on the subject, written by Professor Michael Schmitz of the University of Glessen for the European Crop Protection Association, shows that previous estimates were too conservative. Productivity would actually drop somewhere between a crippling 50% to a staggering 84%.

According to Schmitz, "the [economic] benefits of using crop protection products in agriculture far outweigh the costs to a national economy." Over the last five years, total returns from Canadian crop production have averaged \$14-billion per year, about 1.4% of GDP. Schmitz's numbers translate into ripping somewhere between \$6.9 to \$11.7-billion from the Canadian economy.

A Prairie farm of 2,000 acres that grows a standard mix of grains, oilseeds and special crops would see its income take a hit of somewhere between \$158,000 to \$265,175 per year. These estimates are gross figures. Already, profit margins from crop production are razor-thin, at times falling below the break-even point, and families without off-farm income that haven't diversified into livestock usually have a standard of living below the poverty line.

In addition to destroying a family's ability to generate income, banning CPPs would devastate its equity. The value of farmland is a direct corollary of its productivity. Chopping it in half or more would have matching effects on the price of land. In southern Manitoba, that land today is worth about \$1,000/acre and at least half of what the average young family owns is not paid off. Imagine trying to pay off that debt if land values dropped to \$500 -- or, in the extreme scenario, \$160 -- per acre.

Some have suggested that this impact would be offset by premiums that farmers might receive if their grain were reclassified as "organic" or chemical-free. But this is wishful, Pollyannaish thinking. While a small number of consumers is willing and able to pay these premiums, the vast majority is not. And a dramatic increase in the supply of such products into a very small niche market would quickly erode the premiums to zero.

The negative campaign against chemicals by activists, certain academics and those in the media who blithely take up their cause has long since passed the stage of rational risk assessment. It has morphed into an ideological witch-hunt, in which chemicals such as 2-4,D, used to control broadleaf weeds such as dandelions, are considered guilty even after being proven innocent 4,000 times. Activists cynically and repeatedly exploit public fear, diverting scarce research dollars away from meaningful areas of inquiry into ones with no value.

Scare tactics may score points in coffee houses in Toronto and Montreal, but in the West they can have devastating effects. We flirt with chemophobia at our peril, and should head the words of Professor Schmitz: "It is the responsibility of the world's citizens to ensure that chemical crop protection continues to be used." Amen.

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