News Release

Scientists Call for More Decisive Action in Lowering Children's Exposures to Pesticides

St. Louis, MO (February 19, 2006) – The four scientists making presentations at a symposium during the 2006 annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) issued a joint statement highlighting their key findings and conclusions regarding the effectiveness of efforts in the last decade to reduce children's exposures to pesticides.

Papers from the session "Opportunities and Initiatives to Minimize Children's Exposures to Pesticides" are posted at http://www.organic-center.org/science.events.php.

Joint Statement on Pesticides, Infants and Children

We believe that the scientific case supporting the need to significantly reduce prenatal and childhood exposures to pesticides has greatly strengthened over the last decade since passage of the Food Quality Protection Act (FQPA) in 1996. Evidence of the developmental neurotoxicity of several commonly used pesticides is particularly compelling. The FQPA provided the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) important new tools, ten years, and a mandate to address these sorts of risks and assure that there is a "reasonable certainty of no harm" from government-approved pesticide uses, with special focus on pregnant women, infants and children.

The EPA has acted decisively to eliminate most residential uses of the organophosphate (OP) insecticides. There is encouraging evidence that actions taken to date on residential pesticide uses are producing public health benefits. Equally decisive steps to reduce dietary exposures to high-risk OP pesticides have been regrettably few and far between. Human biomonitoring data shows that only modest progress has been made in reducing OP exposures since passage of the FQPA.

Strong data point to a dramatic shift of pesticide dietary risks from fresh fruits and vegetables grown in the U.S. to those imported from abroad. As a nation, we have more work to do, and contentious decisions ahead if we are to markedly reduce pesticide dietary risks.

How can we best approach this task? In the last decade, significant public and private resources have been invested with the goal of reducing pesticide risks through –

- The discovery and registration of safer pesticides,
- Adoption of Integrated Pest Management systems,

- Ecolabel programs, including “certified organic,” and
- Regulation.

We conclude that discovery of reduced risk pesticides has significantly facilitated the transition by many farmers away from high-risk pesticides. This transition has clearly helped reduce risks in some key children’s foods. EPA policies put in place to expedite registration of reduced risk products should be strengthened.

Adoption of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) has had limited impacts on pesticide use and risks. Most IPM systems are focused on using pesticides efficiently and lack even a secondary focus on dietary risk reduction.

Ecolabel programs have had modest impacts on pesticide risks because they collectively impact so few acres, and many programs do not require farmers to markedly change pest management systems. Organic farming is the clear exception, and offers one proven way to quickly and dramatically reduce children’s exposures. Studies led by Dr. Chensheng Lu of Emory University have shown that a predominantly organic diet essentially eliminates evidence of exposure to certain widely used organophosphate insecticides.

Regulation, and the FQPA in particular, has advanced knowledge of pesticide risks and addressed residential risks reasonably well, but has done little to reduce pesticide dietary risks. The FQPA is fundamentally sound law, but it has not delivered fully on its promise to reduce children’s pesticide risks because of the EPA’s hesitancy to fully use the law’s strong new provisions.

In the absence of more decisive action by EPA, significant near-term reductions in pesticide dietary risks are attainable, but only if farmers are provided support and incentives to change pest management systems, and only if consumers demand change.

We conclude that enhanced efforts by the government and food industry to increase both the supply and demand for organic food will deliver the most significant near-terms public health gains, especially if the focus is on expanding consumption of fresh and processed organic fruits and vegetables, while reducing consumption of foods high in added sugar and added fat content. Building such requirements into the school lunch and WIC programs are obvious ways to start.

Dr. Charles Benbrook 541-828-7918 <cbenbrook@organic-center.org
Dr. Alan Greene 925-964-1793 <clg@drgreene.com>
Dr. Philip Landrigan 212-241-4804 <phil.landrigan@mssm.edu>
Dr. Chensheng (Alex) Lu 404-727-2131 <clu2@sph.emory.edu>