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Pesticides next frontier in China food safety

By Lindsay Beck

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China's farmers overuse pesticides, skip protective clothing and have at their fingertips an array of banned and counterfeit products, raising another area of concern in the country's fragile food chain.

Spraying chemicals on crops improperly or using products that may be fake or banned risks the health of China's hundreds of millions of farmers and could lead to unsafe levels of residues in fruits and vegetables, experts say.

"The government has to stop banned or illegal pesticides being available in the market," said Angus Lam, a Greenpeace Campaign Manager for Food and Agriculture based in the southern city of Guangzhou.

China banned five high toxicity pesticides as of January 1, but Lam said old stock was still in the market, in the hands of traders, retailers and farmers themselves.

The government pledged last week to step up inspections in its food industry, saying checks on fertilizers and pesticides would be one of the priority areas.

That comes after tainted animal feed exported from China led to the deaths of at least 16 cats and dogs in the United States and prompted a recall of more than 100 pet food brands, bringing the country's food safety standards under increased scrutiny.

Evidence suggests that China's farmers routinely misuse pesticides and fail to protect themselves.

A project in the southwestern province of Sichuan undertaken by CropLife Asia, a federation representing manufacturers, found that after training, more farmers used personal protective equipment and more read product labels and followed the instructions.

The training resulted in a decrease in pesticide use and significant cost savings.

But the biggest behavioral change the study found was that farmers properly disposed of pesticide containers -- previously they had tossed empty waste containers into their fields.

MISGUIDED POLICIES

Some experts say that recent government policies that lower the price of pesticides are also misguided.

"Many governments feel that they're doing the farmers a favor by promoting policies that create lower prices for these products, said George Fuller, executive director of CropLife Asia. "The unintended consequence of that is that the farmers don't have a reason to use them properly."

Not only are banned substances available, but Fuller estimates that some 20 percent of the pesticides sold in China are fakes.

"The counterfeiters are good. Sometimes it's very difficult for a farmer to know that he's buying a counterfeit product."

"They're very good at packaging and labels and there are some cases where the counterfeiting has a certain amount of protection from the local authorities," Fuller said.

All agree that China needs to implement a comprehensive system to clean-up the sector.

"You cannot just start at one end," said Angelika Tritscher, a scientist with the World Health Organisation's International Programme on Chemical Safety.

"You have to work on the manufacturing process, you have to work on educating the farmers, you need legislation in place to regulate accessibility to pesticides, and then of course you have to have monitoring programs in place," she said.

China hosts two committees of Codex Alimentarius, the food standards body run by the United Nations, on food additives and pesticides use, an indication that it is taking food safety issues more seriously.

But part of the problem lies in the web of agencies who share responsibility for food safety.

For pesticides, the Ministry of Agriculture monitors field use, the state planner and the Commerce Ministry grant production licenses, the Ministry of Health is responsible for setting maximum residue levels, and the State Environmental Protection Administration monitors environmental impacts.

Producers are often small-scale, and retailers are sometimes travelling salesmen, making monitoring nearly impossible.

"By the time the farmers find out there's some problem, they can't trace back," said Greenpeace's Lam. "The retailer has already moved away."

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