

# Safety last: tests that fail the test

It was the kind of story that elicits gasps. A woman in Oakville, Ont., was doing her supermarket shopping one day in mid-August when she noticed an employee calmly spraying the fruit with an insecticide. Horrified, she lodged a formal complaint. While the incident was quickly dismissed as harmless and "just plain dumb," it held special interest in light of recent reports that pyrethrin, a chemical in the spray, is one of more than 100 pesticides still on the Canadian market although their safety tests have been deemed invalid. Indeed, Canadians are getting doses of all sorts of chemicals with no assurances of safety. And furthermore, Canadian officials have known about the dangers for years but have chosen to do little and say even less.

Pesticides are approved for sale in Canada on a sort of honor system. The chemical company that develops a product is responsible for paying an independent lab to test for short- and long-term health hazards. The results are then submitted to the federal government for registration in Canada. Short of going to the considerable expense of duplicating all testing, the government has little choice but to trust that the procedures have been appropriate and the results honest. And this is where the honor system has broken down. In the past decade alone, separate cases of fraud involving more than a dozen labs or chemical companies have been uncovered in the United States.

The most serious recent case involves more than 100 pesticides tested by the American testing facility, Industrial Biotest Laboratories (IBT). Washington's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is investigating suspected fraud and incompetence in the procedures employed by the company to test possible long-term health hazards. As well, EPA spokesman Jim Sibbison says the agency is auditing test results from "nine or 10 laboratories because of the possibility of careless or deliberately careless work."

Although problems with IBT's testing were first discovered in 1977, Canadian officials didn't release the list of suspect chemicals until mid-June—after three months of repeated inquiries from Saskatchewan's environment department, news media and MPs. In-

cluded on the list (which is still growing) are: dichlorvos, used in "no-pest" strips and some flea collars; diazinon, a popular home and garden insecticide; atrazine, widely used on corn crops in Ontario; and fenitrothion, the controversial spray used in New Brunswick's spruce budworm control program. Dr. David Penman, a health officer with the Saskatchewan environment department, says that by mid-August his department still had not received satisfactory information about how IBT tests were flawed. "When people ask us what is wrong with these chemicals, the answer is, ridiculously enough, 'We don't know.'" The Ontario government has taken a different



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stance. "We have known all about this for the past three years," says George Cooper, chairman of the province's pesticide advisory committee. "But we feel it is a federal matter."

Dr. Alex Morrison, head of the federal health protection branch, is not overly concerned. "If IBT is an aberration we can deal with it," he says. "But a widespread inability to trust them [laboratories and chemical companies] could mean the government stepping in." He hasn't elaborated on what he means by "stepping in," even though the government has already spent \$600,000 investigating IBT alone. But that figure pales beside the \$100 million Morrison estimates it will cost the chemical industry to retest the suspect pesticides discovered so far. He says that pulling all the chemicals off the market until the retesting is completed four years from now would have severe economic effects on Canadian agriculture as well.

The problem has prompted new demands that the federal government establish its own testing facilities. Regina East MP Simon de Jong, the NDP's science critic, says private laboratories have proven they are simply not morally capable of doing the job. He is critical of a recent statement by federal



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Morrison (above left); de Jong (above); masked pesticide sprayer: fraud suspected

Health Minister Monique Bégin that Canada is a small country that would have trouble testing all the chemicals in use here and should therefore take advantage of whatever information it can get elsewhere. Says de Jong: "The information we have been obtaining from other countries has proven to be false. The argument in favor of our own independent, trustworthy labs is just plain common sense."

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