Toxic terrorists ignore organic food threat

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A respected newspaper notes the latest toll among Europeans of a virulent strain of the bacterium E. coli, the source of which has recently been determined to be sprouts from an organic farm in Germany. In the same newspaper, a few pages distant, a credulous journalist has in essence copied and pasted another press release from the Environmental Working Group (EWG), a U.S. activist organization, warning us yet again about the traces of pesticide residues on their so-called "Dirty Dozen" list of fruits and vegetables. Wait -didn't they try the same tactic only a few months ago? Don't ostensible journalists remember this same trick, which EWG uses to garner attention and subscribers?

The irony of the latest EWG food scare would warrant a self-satisfied smirk if it weren't so tragic.

Of course, these alarmist toxic terrorists deny any attempt to dissuade us from consuming healthful produce. Who, us? Jamais! they say. "The benefits outweigh the risks," their spokespeople declaim, hypocritically, disingenuously. Of course, they had no idea that poor parents would be scared away from apples merely because they assert -and the sensation-happy media eagerly echo -that the "tainted" fruit harbours traces of pesticide residues. Well, let them eat organic is their answer -never mind the premium of 50% to 75% on supposedly pesticide-free fruit.

In fact, organic products come replete with their own special types of pesticides. Further, the cynical manipulators of EWG know full well what the reporters and the public do not: Contrary to their malicious assertions, pesticides are not toxic to humans of any age. Even if they were, the minute amounts found on fruits and vegetables would barely harm a fly. The published literature, plus numerous regulatory reviews by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency, confirm that modern pesticides in approved uses pose no health threat -not to consumers and not even to farm workers who are most highly exposed.

Those groups who publish the scare stories about crop protection chemicals are comprised of anti-technology, anti-business, anti-progress ideologues whose diatribes are based upon no science. In fact, pesticides have to undergo as many tests for toxicity by the EPA as pharmaceuticals do to pass muster with the FDA. If that is true -and it is -imagine the actual risk to those of us who eat apples and the other "dirty dozen" fruits and veggies "tainted" with the minuscule residues found by the USDA. It is essentially zero.

Western consumers take the safety, quality and quantity of our daily bread for granted. It was not always so: Before modern chemical protection, infestation-induced droughts were commonplace, even in North America. How many of us have the slightest idea what the quality and availability of our food would be without pesticides -not to mention the affordability? Reliable estimates credit crop protection chemicals with at least a 33% enhancement of crop yields. In today's economic environment, fraught with onslaughts of crop failures and food shortages with their attendant price increases and rising malnutrition, EWG's attempt to slander the manifold benefits of pesticides is irresponsible, bordering on criminal. Furthermore, protecting our food crops from pests -insects, fungi, etc. -helps protect our own public health as well, since pest-damaged crops allow real health threats to penetrate and infect our food.

At this juncture in the food production supply-demand equation, we cannot afford to lose any of the safe and beneficial chemicals in widespread use -as happened to the apple-growth regulator Alar in 1989. Back then, a massive campaign, orchestrated by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and its well-heeled and savvy PR machine, Fenton Communications, forced Alar's manufacturer to withdraw it from the market for no reason relevant to health or science. CBS's 60 Minutes supplied invaluable assistance in that endeavour, along with such noted toxicologists as Meryl Streep. To this day, when a scare campaign smacks of bad faith, the media call my organization, the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH), and ask us, "Is this just another Alar?"

This latest EWG publicity campaign is particularly perverse in light of the recent outbreak of organic sprout-related food-borne disease and death in Europe. I do not maintain that organic methods are necessarily more dangerous than conventional farming with modern pesticides -although that is a real possibility. But I do state that organic is certainly of no health benefit, and much more expensive. Further, I am curious as to why the Gulf oil spill and the nuclear accident in post-tsunami Japan, neither of which led to any deaths, were the biggest environmental news stories of the past year, while the current lethal epidemic in Europe has led to few if any media or "environmentalist" calls for a re-evaluation of the safety of organic agriculture.

Let me now make such a demand: If "better safe than sorry" is the new risk-averse mantra of anti-chemical activists and government regulators, why not take a long, hard look into organic methods? Conventional agricultural methods have been investigated and evaluated for decades, and have passed every test, despite "the sky is falling" alarms of the numerous groups like the EWG. Let's not be distracted by phony allegations of "pesticide toxicity" when such chemicals have harmed no one and benefited everyone, and go where the evidence leads as far as health threats are concerned.

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