Briefing Room Q&As
2014 Pesticide Data Program (PDP) Annual Summary

Q: What are the main conclusions from the 2014 Pesticide Data Program annual summary?

A: The PDP summary shows that, overall, pesticide residues found on foods tested are at levels below the tolerances set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and do not pose risk to consumers' health.

Q: What are the purpose and value of this summary?

A: The pesticide data that USDA publishes each year provide regulators, scientists, farmers, processors, manufacturers, and consumers with important insights into the actual levels of pesticide residues found on widely consumed foods. EPA uses PDP data to conduct dietary risk assessments and to ensure that any pesticide residues in foods remain at safe levels.

USDA also uses the data to better understand the relationship of pesticide residues to agricultural practices and to enhance USDA's Integrated Pest Management objectives. USDA shares PDP data with our trading partners to demonstrate the safety of U.S. exports. The results indicate that many growers have successfully been able to incorporate the newer, safer pesticides as opposed to older pesticides in their integrated pest management programs.

Q: What were the results?

A: The 2014 data summary shows that when pesticide residues are found on foods, they are nearly always at levels below the tolerances set by the EPA. In 2014, over 41 percent of the samples tested had no detectable pesticide residue and over 99 percent of the samples tested had residues below the tolerances established by the EPA. Residues exceeding the established tolerance were detected in 0.36 percent (38 of 10,619) of the samples, and 2.6 percent (281 of 10,619) of the samples had residues with no established tolerance for the specific commodity tested. For infant formula, the data show that no residues were found that exceeded the tolerance levels, nor were there any residues with no established tolerance.

Q: What is a tolerance level?

A: A tolerance is the maximum amount of a pesticide residue allowable on a raw agricultural commodity (RAC)[1]. If a pesticide is used on food crops, EPA sets a tolerance for the pesticide that can remain in or on foods. In setting the tolerance, EPA evaluates hazard and exposure data to assess risk to human health and the environment for requested uses. EPA is required to make a safety finding for the pesticide that accounts for exposure through various food items, water, and home environments. PDP data is a critical component of EPA's dietary assessments of pesticide exposure.

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[1] For processed commodities, the tolerance reported by PDP is for the RAC unless a specific tolerance for the processed commodity is established.

Q: How many samples were taken?

A: PDP tested a total of 10,619 samples. The products tested were fresh and processed fruit and vegetables (8,582 samples), oats (314 samples), rice (314 samples), infant formula (1,055 samples), and salmon (354 samples). Data are collected in a variety of States and throughout the year such that the samples are representative of the entire United States.

Q: Is the food I buy safe for my child?

A: Yes, based on the data from the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) and on EPA's assessment that the small amount of pesticides found in a few of the samples present no health risk, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has concluded that pesticide residues pose no risk of concern for infants and children.

Q: Does PDP test water?

A: PDP tested raw and finished drinking water drawn from municipal systems from 2001 through 2013. Samples were collected from 29 States plus the District of Columbia. PDP also tested groundwater (2007 through 2013) and bottled water. PDP's water surveys were discontinued in 2013 due to funding constraints.

Q: Why doesn't PDP test for some pesticides, such as glyphosate?

A: USDA's Pesticide Data Program (PDP) and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) work together to identify foods to be tested based on EPA's data needs. EPA uses PDP data to conduct dietary risk assessments and to ensure that pesticide residues in foods are not a food safety risk.

In 2011, PDP tested 300 soybean samples for glyphosate and its metabolite AMPA (aminomethylphosphonic acid). The results showed that no samples exceeded the tolerance for glyphosate. The results from the Glyphosate testing were published in the PDP 2011 Summary and are discussed on page 25.

Currently, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is testing corn and soybean grains for glyphosate residues. For additional information, please contact FDA at (Chris.Sack@fda.hhs.gov).

Q: What happens when samples have residues but no tolerance has been set by EPA?

A: FDA considers samples that contain pesticide residues for which no tolerances have been established by EPA to be in violation of the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act. FDA uses this information to inform its future compliance activities, such as conducting targeted testing or implementing Import Alerts to flag future shipments for closer scrutiny. With the 2014 data, FDA evaluated the PDP data and, in consultation with EPA, determined there was no immediate health risk. It is important to remember that the samples for which no tolerance was established had extremely low levels of residues and were found in 2.6 percent of samples. These levels did not exceed tolerance levels for other commodities that have established tolerances for the pesticide residues detected.

Q: How else does EPA use the PDP data?

A: EPA uses PDP data for its ongoing evaluation of pesticide tolerances to ensure that the levels set by EPA meet the safety standards prescribed by the law. EPA has cancelled or modified uses for various pesticide registrations based on PDP data. Furthermore, the Food Quality Protection Act (FQPA) of 1996 mandated periodic review of all registered pesticides. Through the agency's registration review program, all pesticides distributed and sold in the United States must be registered by EPA based on scientific data showing that they will not cause unreasonable risks to human health, workers, or the environment when used as directed on product labeling. As the ability to assess risk evolves and as policies and practices change, the registration review program ensures that all registered pesticides continue to meet the statutory standard of no unreasonable adverse effects.