
Government announces plans to establish a pesticides forum

Abstract

Summarizes the themes emerging from a conference held in London in October 1995 to discuss Government policy on the minimization of pesticide use and suggests mechanisms through which its main conclusions might be developed.

The Government recently announced plans to set up a group to co-ordinate activities on the responsible use of pesticides. The Pesticides Forum is a Government initiative, which will bring together key agricultural, environmental, food and other groups. Making the announcement, Angela Browning, Parliamentary Secretary at MAFF, said:

Pesticide use is a complex issue depending as it does on many external factors including changing patterns of cropping and disease. In recent years there have been a range of initiatives by Government and by agricultural, environmental and food interests bearing on this area. The main features of a possible action plan for the responsible use of pesticides were set out in the recent Rural White Paper. The Government wishes to bring together key interests within a forum to co-ordinate developments. A lot of very positive work is going on and we wish to build on that to assist us in carrying forward policy on responsible pesticide use.

This announcement follows up a conference opened by James Clappison, Parliamentary Secretary for the Environment, held in October 1995 to discuss Government policy on the minimization of pesticide use. The policy is essentially about best practice in the use of pesticides. That is, only using pesticides when they are needed, only using the amount of pesticides needed to do the job and adopting alternative strategies for pest and disease control where possible.

The October Conference was attended by over 80 delegates from farming, agrochemical, environmental and other organizations and chaired by Geoff Bruce, Chief Executive of the Pesticides Safety Directorate. Speakers at the conference plenary session were Alistair Cruickshank, Under Secretary, Agricultural Inputs, MAFF; Peter Beaumont, Director of the Pesticides Trust; Tony Pike, Director of the British Agrochemicals Association; Mark Tinsley, Chairman of the National Farmers' Union Retail Partnership on ICM and Ian Finlayson, J. Sainsbury plc.

In its White Paper, *This Common Inheritance* published in 1990, the Government set out five key principles governing the approval of pesticides. The first of these was that "the amount of pesticide used should be limited to the minimum necessary for the effective control of pests compatible with the protection of human health and the environment". This principle underpins the Government's "pesticides minimization" policy which is being pursued through a rigorous approval

and review programme for pesticides, through guidance to users and through research and development. More recently the Biodiversity Steering Group has identified the minimization of pesticide use as a key issue in maintaining and increasing biodiversity.

Independently, the agrochemical industry, farming organizations, retailers, environmental organizations and others are all undertaking activities which have a bearing on the Government's policy on pesticide minimization. The objectives may be described variously as "minimization", "optimization" or "risk reduction" of pesticides or the promotion of "environmentally responsible farming". The types of initiative are wide ranging and the participation equally varied. However, there are common themes in much of the activity. These themes relate in particular to the promotion of the responsible use of pesticides and the advancement of farming systems which make the most efficient use of chemical controls. Such systems involve, in particular, integrated crop management (ICM) practices. While the term ICM embraces a wider philosophy, a key component is the use of a range of strategies within which the use of pesticides is integrated to secure the most effective pest, disease and weed control.

Given the variety of initiatives and participants and the complexity of the issue it would not be possible to mould all these initiatives into one single minimization project even if it were thought desirable to do so. However, there is clearly value in all those with an interest in pesticide minimization co-operating so as to reinforce the various sectoral activities. Against this background a conference was organized in London on 25 October 1995 which brought together some 80 organizations and individuals.

This paper summarizes the themes emerging from the conference and suggests mechanisms through which its main conclusions might be developed.

Common themes

The areas of agreement at the conference were:

- an appreciation of the number of initiatives which were already under way all pointing towards the broad minimization objective set out in *This Common Inheritance*;

- a general wish to co-operate so as to increase the effectiveness of different initiatives contributing to minimization;
- a belief that any new arrangements should not be too prescriptive, but should encourage growers to consider appropriate options to minimize pesticide use;
- the aim should be to achieve continuous improvement encompassing farming methods, the products and technologies available to farmers and the product specifications of their customers;
- particular support for the promotion of integrated crop management as a vehicle for pursuing pesticide minimization;
- a belief that effective technology transfer (and improvements in the speed of uptake of research and development) was key to progress in pesticide minimization and that any future minimization programme needed to encompass adequate arrangements for such transfer;
- a recognition that a variety of agri-environment measures, including organic farming, could contribute to pesticide minimization;
- that whatever minimization "programme" might be put in place it should be measurable in some way in order to check on the progress which is being made.

The way forward

To progress these conclusions the Government suggests that ideas should be taken forward in two main areas as follows:

- the establishment of an umbrella group, or forum, which has within it the key players who can guide the various minimization initiatives in a coherent way;
- the active involvement of the Advisory Committee on Pesticides (ACP) in the minimization concept so that it not only receives reports but also offers guidance on the progress which is being made and possible lines of future development.

A pesticides "forum"

The Government sees a need for a forum within which minimization issues can be discussed and liaison between the various interests developed. To be manageable, representation would need to be limited so that the size of the forum (say about 20) was sufficiently small to allow effective participation.

This would mean that some smaller organizations would need to work together to nominate a single common representative. There could be bi-annual meetings and reports could be produced to reach a wider audience. Separate meetings might be arranged on an *ad hoc* basis by the forum, for instance, to widen consultation on particular issues or pursue particular projects.

Participation in the forum would be by invitation and decisions taken or initiatives recommended would not be binding on the individuals or organizations represented at the forum. The forum would provide a mechanism for exchanging views and ideas and for developing co-operation and co-ordination. To work effectively it would need active participation and representation at a reasonably senior level from participating organizations. Participation in the minimization conference suggests that such support would be forthcoming.

The Government will write to interested organizations with proposals for participation in the forum and for an inaugural meeting.

Issues for the forum

The initial agenda for the forum would draw on the draft Government action plan introduced in the Rural White Paper. Some elements which will be considered for inclusion in the Action Plan were given in the Rural White Paper. Particular areas for consideration would be:

- the improvement of education and training on pesticide minimization through schemes for advisers and users;
- promoting the adoption of minimization techniques, for instance through guidance material or the extension services;

- arrangements for effective technology transfer to improve the speed with which new research results can be adopted by industry.

Report to the advisory committee on pesticides

The ACP advises Government on pesticide matters in general and is at the heart of the approvals process. Given this central position it is logical to seek to use the Committee's expertise to support pesticide minimization. It is well placed to identify at an early stage particular issues or areas of interest which the forum might take forward.

The first report to the ACP will be made in the first half of 1996 and will look particularly at trends in pesticide usage and the factors that have affected them. It will invite the Committee to consider areas to which future "minimization" effort might be directed.

Monitoring

It was a common theme of the conference that indicators should be produced to monitor the success of the minimization policy. The question of indicators of the environmental risk posed by pesticides is already under active consideration as part of a wider Government initiative to develop indicators of sustainable development. It is a complex issue and a good deal of further work is likely to be needed before worthwhile indicators can be identified. Other indicators might be developed through the minimization forum in relation to more readily measurable objectives such as the number of growers operating under ICM protocols in a particular sector. This issue will be an early item for discussion at the minimization forum.