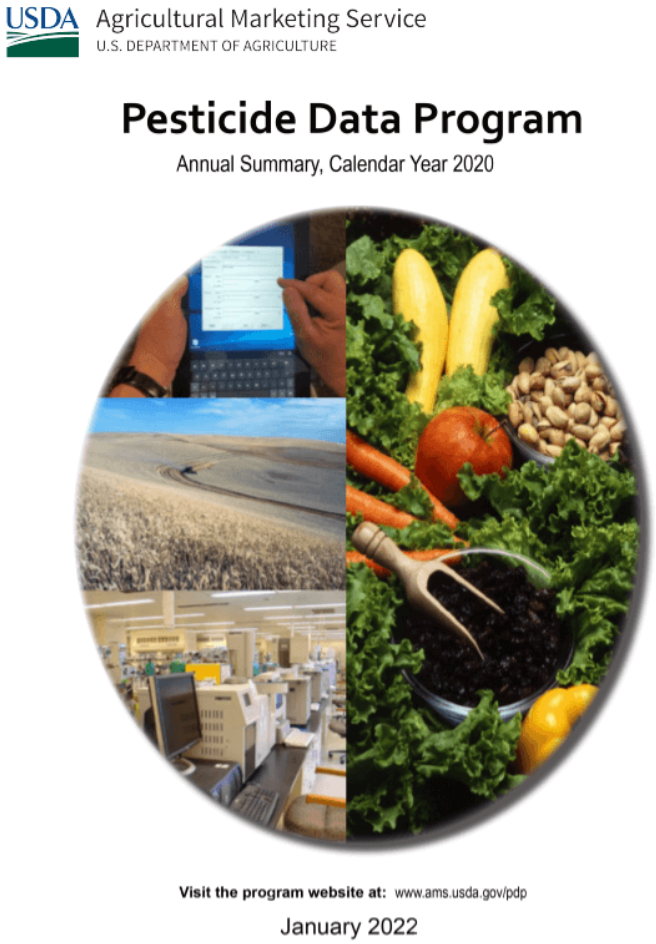
Rebuffing activist claims, USDA confirms American-grown fruits and vegetables are free of harmful trace pesticides

The results of the USDA's Pesticide Data Program (PDP) for 2020 are in, and they lend themselves to two important but unsurprising conclusions: the trace amounts of pesticides in our food supply still don't pose a measurable health risk; environmental groups have no interest in reporting this fact to the public. Let's take them in turn.

PDP overview

Each year for 30 years, the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) has collected and tested samples of the domestic and imported produce that ends up in our grocery stores to ensure they contain pesticide residues below levels that could pose a health risk to consumers. "This Annual Summary report shows," AMS wrote in the introduction to the most recent analysis, "that when pesticide residues are found on foods, they are nearly always at levels below the tolerance, or maximum amount of a pesticide allowed to remain in or on a food, that is set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)."



2020 results

The year 2020 was no exception to this trend. Regulators collected and tested produce from 10 states — 9,600 samples of fresh and processed fruits and vegetables in total. These states are home to half the U.S. population and represent all of the nation's major fruit and vegetable producers.

With the help of laboratories in each state, the agency conducted 2.6 million analyses after looking for each pesticide on each sampled commodity, all of which can be reviewed on the USDA's website. Just 47 samples, or 0.49 percent, of the 9,600 samples exceeded the EPA's tolerances. Overall, the agency's analysis found that

> *… over 99 percent of the samples tested had residues below the tolerances established by the EPA with 30.0 percent having no detectable residue.*

What about the children?

Activist groups routinely dismiss this sort of pesticide safety testing from federal agencies as inadequate. Consumers Union alleged in 2020, for example, that

> *The 1996 Food Quality Protection Act requires the EPA to apply extra protection when science doesn't conclusively show that a chemical is safe for infants and children. Known as the 'FQPA safety factor,' it lowers the cap on pesticide residue from one one-hundredth to one one-thousandth of the amount found not to harm lab animals. But with the exception of organophosphates, this safety margin has rarely been used.*

I count myself among the parents who want to know that our kids aren't exposed to harmful amounts of pesticide, but Consumers Union was simply incorrect on this point. The USDA explicitly pointed out in its 2020 analysis (p 21) that "EPA uses all available information provided by registrants, PDP, and others to verify that tolerances meet the safety standards set by FQPA." That's reassuring, though there are several other details relevant to protecting children from harmful exposures:

- USDA typically selects samples of the most widely consumed produce, "with an emphasis on foods consumed by infants and children."
- The FDA uses PDP reports to conduct two of its own surveillance efforts: the Pesticide Data Monitoring program, which also evaluates raw agricultural commodities, and the Total Diet Study, a broader analysis of "table-ready foods," including baby foods and formulas.
- As an added layer of protection, EPA utilizes the PDP results to perform "dietary risk assessments and review the maximum amount of a pesticide [the tolerance] allowed to remain in or on a food."

Assessing risk vs. stoking fear

These results are really good news on the food-safety front, and they underscore an important point we can tease out of this statement from the USDA report:

> *"Pesticide use is primarily dictated by local pest pressures and environmental conditions conducive to growth of pest populations, as well as the planting of susceptible varieties. These differences are captured by PDP data, which* ***reflect actual residues present in food*** *." [my emphasis].*

Regulatory agencies, flawed though they are, actually try to evaluate agricultural pesticide use and give consumers useful information about the risks they may face. Contrast this evidence-based approach to the efforts of activist groups. Just last week, a coalition of nonprofits led by Pesticide Action Network pressured California to halt "the overuse of chemical inputs" in farming. They complained about "the historical inequities and environmental injustices created by industrial agriculture" and lobbied the state to force organic practices on farmers.

What they didn't do is cite any data, and therein lies the stark difference between sound regulatory science and ideological activism. One helps you make informed decisions; the other tries to scare you to

advance an agenda.

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