

Double standards, double risk Banned pesticides in Europe's food supply

Hazardous pesticides banned in Europe are making their way into European consumers' diets, according to a new report by PAN Europe. Many of these toxic pesticides are produced by European companies and exported to third countries with weaker safety regulations, only to return as residues in imported food. Some are even detected in EU-grown food, indicating illegal use or that Member States are exploiting 'emergency' exemptions to continue their use after their ban.

The EU claims to ban toxic pesticides to protect citizens' health but allows producers to serve the same substances for dinner. PAN Europe analysed the 2022 official monitoring data from Member States on pesticide residues in food collected by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) [1]. We selected plant-based samples considered low risk.

Key findings:

- 69 banned and hazardous pesticides were detected in European food. The most frequently detected included the mutagenic and toxic to reproduction fungicide carbendazim, the toxic to reproduction pesticides linuron (herbicide) and propiconazole (fungicide), and the bee-killing neurotoxic neonicotinoid insecticides clothianidin, thiamethoxam and imidacloprid.
- Certain products had EU-banned pesticides more often than others: tea (38% of the tested samples), coffee (23%), spices (13%) and legumes (11%).
- Overall, imported food was twice as likely to contain EU-banned pesticides compared to food grown within the EU. Spices, legumes and cereals grown outside the EU were 4 to 16 times more likely to be contaminated with banned pesticides than those grown within the EU.
- European-grown fruit with the highest contamination rates included currants (13% of the tested samples), bananas (13%), grapefruit (9%), and blueberries (9%). Imported fruits like grapefruit (30%), mandarins (26%), limes (24%) and oranges (13%) showed even higher contamination rates.
- The top five exporting countries with the highest rates of samples with EU-banned pesticides were India (24%), Uganda (18%), China (17%), Kenya (17%) and Brazil (16%). Among EU countries, food samples from Portugal (13%), Malta (9%), Poland (8%), Cyprus (7%) and Austria (6%) had the highest contamination rates.
- Several samples contained more than one EU-banned pesticide in mixtures or "cocktails", which are not yet regulated. In many cases, the concentrations exceeded the established "safety" limits for residues in food.

The data show that every time that we enjoy a relaxing tea or coffee, or want to add flavour to our meals, we may unknowingly increase our exposure to toxic chemicals. Even some products marketed as "superfoods", like ginger, turmeric, legumes and avocados, are contaminated - misleading consumers into thinking they are making healthy choices when, in reality, they are consuming contaminated food.

A double standard in global trade and EU health protection

The EU's exports of banned pesticides are mainly destined for low- or middle-income countries, where weaker environmental and health protection laws are in place. This endangers the health of people and the environment in importing countries, while also placing

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EU farmers at a competitive disadvantage. The EU then imports food grown with these pesticides and often allows their residues to be detected in food. PAN Europe found at least 60 EU-banned pesticides for which the Maximum Residue Limits are set above the level of detection for certain food items to please international trade partners.

Rina Guadagnini, Senior Policy Officer at PAN Europe affirms: “Our report shows that residues of prohibited pesticides are found in randomly collected samples not expected to be of any risk. The report also demonstrates that some of these pesticides are still used within Europe despite their ban.”

Effect of French effort to stop export of hazardous pesticides

We also zoomed in on France, which has taken the lead in stopping the export of hazardous pesticides. We assessed whether this commitment has an impact on French consumer goods. We cannot evaluate the effect yet, but the findings show that in 2022, 2.5% of 'low -risk' food samples in France still contained banned pesticides.

In the face of a global crisis driven by chemical pollution and biodiversity loss, we urge EU policymakers to demonstrate leadership by ending unethical double standards. They should adopt zero tolerance in EU food for residues of banned pesticides and ensure that EU-banned pesticides are not used anymore in Europe.

Angeliki Lysimachou, head of Science and Policy at PAN Europe concludes: “Pesticides deemed too toxic for use here are too toxic for use everywhere. Protecting public health and biodiversity, both within and beyond Europe, must take precedence over trade and industry profits.”

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Notes:

[1] We screened the food residue data for pesticides listed under Regulation (EU) 649/2012, known as the Prior Informed Consent (PIC) Regulation. This regulation governs the export and import of hazardous substances that are banned or severely restricted in the EU due to their toxicity. While these pesticides cannot be used within the EU, their export to third countries is still permitted, provided that the importing countries give their consent.

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