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Author

Jones, Pamela

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PESTICIDES, SCIENTISTS, FARMERS, AND THE PUBLIC: NO "WHITE KNIGHT" RESCUE IN SIGHT

PAMELA JONES, Jones Communications; and Executive Director, California Alliance for Food and Fiber, San Carlos, California 94070.

ABSTRACT: The pesticide controversy is much more complicated than simply a disagreement over facts and risk estimates between the "experts" and the "fearful." It is a battle over ideology as much as one over information. This paper discusses the notion of "educating the public" about pesticides, establishing realistic expectations of efforts by industry and academia, and notes some of the limitations, and potential involvement, of scientists as "translators" in dealing with this controversy.

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I don't have to go through my list of recent news articles about the pesticide controversy to tell you that there is intense interest on the part of the state and federal legislatures, the news media and some individuals on this issue. There is no one in this room that is unaware of the controversy. But do you really understand what's going on out there? Or do you, like many, sit back and wring your hands wondering why someone doesn't "do something!" about the bad rap pesticides get when you pick up your newspaper or turn on your television? Who's out there "educating the public" to gain their acceptance of pesticides as a necessary part of life?

NO "WHITE KNIGHT" PR PROGRAMS

Overall, I think many people in the agricultural and chemical industries want to hire a big PR firm to go out there and "educate the public" -- make them accept the use of chemicals in agriculture and stop complaining about it. I've been dealing with this controversy from a PR role since 1980, and I think I can say with some assurance, that's not going to happen. Why? A couple of reasons. First, because there is no mechanism in place -- organizationally or financially -- within the agricultural and chemical industries on the national level to conduct a serious program that would have significant impact on 235 million Americans. Certainly there are numerous lobbyists employed by the 63 national farm and ag chemical-related trade associations located in Washington, D.C., not to mention lobbyists back there who represent state and regional groups and companies, but those people focus their efforts almost entirely on attempting to persuade 53 United States Senators and 125 U.S. Congressmen on six committees which oversee legislation related to agricultural and chemical issues. The National Agricultural Chemicals Association, which focusses entirely on ag chem issues, has just one person in charge of the entire public affairs efforts of the industry. Its public affairs budget has been abysmally low, with a good portion of its PR efforts aimed at telling farmers and applicators how to avoid accidents, and, to their credit, finally waking up to the groundwater contamination issue.

But money alone is not the answer in persuading people about risks. Ask the U.S. nuclear power industry which spends \$180 million a year on just its communications programs.

More importantly, there is no PR firm or program that has the power over the attitudes and beliefs of those 235 million Americans to calm the big debate -- the big debate being that over technology and society, not just pesticides.

THE "EXPERTS" VS. THE "FEARFUL"

Why is it that I am pessimistic about a nationwide effort to "educate the public"? Number one, I don't think the majority of the ag, chemical or university people even understand what the problem is with regard to the public's perception of chemicals. And, number two, it is naive to believe that a temporary information campaign will alter attitudes and beliefs that have, for most people, developed over a number of years from many sources of information, much of which is not even directly related to the particular issue of pesticides.

Let me be more specific about my two points, the first being that we don't really understand the problem.

In general, "industry people," along with some academics and regulators, explain the controversy as a communications and education problem due to lack of knowledge about technology and irrational fear on the part of the public and workers. They compare the risks of using chemicals with the much greater risk of driving cars, ignoring the fact that the public feels "in control" when they drive, they feel it is a voluntary activity, and they believe they derive some personal benefit from using a car.

Chemical users stand up in front of groups and declare, "I've used pesticides for 25 years and I have five healthy children and I've never missed a day of work," as if to say "If I'm safe, so are you." The problem with that argument is that it is scientifically invalid, and, most important, people just don't believe it. (In a June 1987 public opinion survey conducted for the California Alliance for Food and Fiber, 64 percent of the 500 respondents rejected that as a valid point.)

Nevertheless, what "industry and academics" are really saying is that people don't realize how low most chemical risks faced by the public are, and if they did, the people should be willing to tolerate these low-level risks in exchange for certain benefits. The expressed strategy: "educate the public and they will realize how minimal the risks are."

Those opposed to certain technologies describe the risk controversy in very different terms -- that of business putting profits before people, a governmental system that fails to protect the people, and they refer to themselves as helpless victims who are "guinea pigs" being subjected to a "time bomb" of a dismal nature. They criticize industry and academics for making the issues unnecessarily and overly complex and too big to deal with, and they charge industry with withholding information. They believe, "It's the polluters who should pay for mistakes, not the consumers nor the government."

The strategy for those philosophically opposed to chemical use: Instill doubt in the minds of the average citizen or legislator about the safety of using chemicals (or nuclear power, biotechnology or irradiation, for that matter). Then, convince the legislators and regulators -- and the public -- that if risks must be borne by the public and/or workers, they should be minimized to the fullest extent possible -- not necessary, but possible -- regardless of cost. This is the basis for California's Proposition 65 -- The Safe Drinking Water and Toxic Enforcement Act -- the first part of which went into effect February 27, 1988. Support is generated at the grassroots level by convincing people that they, the people, take the risks and it is the faceless, anonymous corporations that reap the benefits. People have an innate sense of avoiding risks unless they see some personal benefit. And they don't see a personal benefit to the use of chemicals in agriculture, and many of them don't see the connection with public health protection. This fact, too, was confirmed in our statewide survey. We learned that while people may believe that the major reasons for pesticide use are increased yields and the need to "kill bugs," they do not take that next step and see any personal benefits -- namely lower food costs and greater availability. Only two percent cited a primary use of pesticides as controlling diseases and germs.

THE ESSENCE OF THE CONTROVERSY: CONFLICTING SOCIAL VALUES

In short, the real arguments between environmentalists and industry are not so much about facts or probabilities of risk as they are objections to the social/political/economic systems which generate the risks and with which the average person feels few ties. It is a reflection of different attitudes toward power, control, choice, infringement upon liberties and industrial democracy. Thus, attitudes about technical risks tend to be imbedded in conscious and unconscious feelings about the source of the risk, along with the issue of equity -- who gets the benefits and who takes the risks -- and the issue of liability -- whose fault is contamination and who should pay to clean it up?

I've had discussions with a representative of the Natural Resources Defense Council in San Francisco with whom I occasionally appear opposite in debates. Since she had been involved in last year's negotiations between the environmental and the ag and chemical groups over the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA), I asked her whether the disagreements centered mainly on factual or ideological differences. The long arguments were over ideology; the short ones were about information. Her example was the liability issue for groundwater. The farmers wanted to be exempted from liability if groundwater were to become polluted from ag practices. The manufacturers wanted out, saying "If applied according to label directions ...," and the NRDC felt that in an ideal world the manufacturers should be held liable as an incentive for safer products, but that it was difficult to determine exactly how and why the contamination occurred and whose fault it was. Each interest group brought into play their values of how society should operate and where responsibility lies when things don't go according to plan.

What all of this means in terms of the chemical controversy is that individuals or groups committed to different social/political ideologies (for instance, technical progress and economic competition versus agrarian utopia and preservation of a pristine environment) are headed for a clash.

THE FALLACY OF "EDUCATING THE PUBLIC"

I hinted earlier my feelings about the ineffectiveness of a temporary information or PR campaign. This is based on the established communications principle that peoples' values do not necessarily change with more information -- particularly when the information is conflicting or when it contradicts what they already perceive to be true. As they say in communications research, people tend to hear what they believe, not the other way around. This is why communications efforts by "business advocates" and even scientists, particularly industry scientists, and even government regulators, are sometimes greeted with skepticism, if not the charge that "you're lying." The information the public hears from these sources is not consistent with their internal beliefs about the motivations, credibility and responsibility of industry and regulators.

In addition, there is some evidence that knowing just a little bit about something can make you more skeptical of the issue or technology than complete ignorance. Therefore, it is naive to believe that the solution to the chemical risk controversy in this country is simply to "educate the public." Again, the bottom line is that this controversy is as much over ideology as it is over information. And ideology is a difficult thing to alter with a public relations program. For instance, if a person is firmly convinced that industry's greed, reflected in its use of chemicals which are unquestionably "toxic," is responsible for a nationwide "cancer epidemic," there's not much you can alter that by telling him that coyotes and rats really need to be killed or controlled.

A REALISTIC ASSESSMENT OF INVOLVEMENT AND IMPACT

Well, I've just given you my impressions of the underlying themes of the pesticide controversy along with my reasons for believing that no white knight PR program is going to calm the stormy seas of the pesticide controversy on the national level. It even sounds like I've talked myself out of a job as being the spokesperson for California agriculture on the issue of pesticides and being so presumptuous as to say I conduct a PR program on the issue. Should we all just pack it up and concede defeat in the battle over public opinion? Obviously, I did not set myself up to answer yes and offer my resignation at this meeting.

There really is no choice but for each group involved in this controversy to figure out its best case and be ready to put it forward in a way that addresses the concerns of the public, not just that particular group. Next, those groups need to realistically assess what impact they can and can't have. Don't think that any one program is going to reach 235 million Americans or even California's 26 million residents. Most of those people don't have the time or the interest to really study the issues as you whose careers depend on it do.

In my experience, most of the farmers, pest control advisors, and chemical company people spend an inordinate amount of time worrying about the perceptions of people in the cities and an inadequate amount of time worrying about what people in their own backyard think. Why do I say this? Because, realistically, most of you will not have an impact on the opinion leaders in our big cities, but you can and will affect the perceptions of those you live and work with. And if you're having problems in your own backyard, that's what may eventually make it to the attention of a wider audience.

So, the first part of my speech tries to make the point that it is not possible for a national PR program to get people to accept the notion that a little bit of poison is okay. The second part of my speech is to emphasize the importance of realizing that public relations and education begins in one's own backyard, not in a chat with Mike Wallace on "60 Minutes," and it is something each of you can affect.

THE SILENT SCIENTISTS -- THE NEED FOR "TRANSLATORS"

Why is it that the most credible source of information on the topic of chemicals, university scientists, are reluctant to get involved in the controversy? Let me suggest a few reasons:

1) It's not their job. University people talk to other university people (called peers) and Extension people talk to farmers and pest control advisors. Few people in the university system, with the exception of a few I could count on one hand, see it as benefiting their careers to direct information at the interested public or the media. And why should they if they don't get "brownie points" for it? I, too, would spend my time doing research to be published under those circumstances.

2) Even if scientists did want to do something to foster a better understanding of the realities of pest management,

few scientists really know enough about how to go about it, who they should be talking to, or what makes a persuasive argument. And, in my opinion, the scientists aren't getting very creative help from their communications people on an issue that everyone in the ag, the chemical, and the academic worlds agrees is a major public perception problem. It's not enough to get articles about progress in farming technology published in trade publications; why not aim for material the public and/or opinion leaders read -- such as People magazine and Reader's Digest.

3) Scientists often feel harassed, misquoted and misunderstood. They are and they will be. That's life. Journalists, politicians and environmentalists feel they're underpaid, overworked and undervalued. They are and they will be. That's life. But the journalists, politicians and environmentalists are going to continue pursuing this chemical controversy; and if legitimate scientists don't take the interest in speaking up for the realities of producing food, there are other pseudo-scientists who will.

4) And lastly, some of the scientists, particularly those who are more experienced in these issues than I, wonder whether it really makes a difference to get involved. Sometimes I ask myself that, too. And I can't really answer. I have no statistics like the lobbyists do -- x number of bills passed and y number of bills killed. I can deal with that ambiguity and uncertainty, but I accept that many people would find that too intangible and frustrating.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1) If the Land Grant universities are going to direct much of their resources toward research on chemical pest control, it seems reasonable that they might want to be more public in supporting and defending their findings. And, if the research unveils damaging information, that too should be known.

2) Undertake some economic analyses of pesticide use. I've scoured the literature to find out such information and the best that I can come up with is information gathered by Dr. David Pimintel of Cornell in the mid-1970s. The public, and I, would like to know what differences in yields and public health protection pesticides make? Why do we really have to kill fuzzy little animals?

3) Encourage Cooperative Extension to explore possibilities for bringing different factions together in communities where pesticides and vertebrate pest control seem to be an issue. Usually, community people want to be listened to and they want the farming/chemical industries to make some compromises. Before the issue starts drawing statewide attention, perhaps the University could act to bring the groups together and open up lines of communication.

4) Produce, encourage and reward "translators" -- those scientists and non-scientists who can take complex scientific information and make it meaningful to the public. We need committed, sensitive and intelligent people with the support of their professions, their institutions, and their companies to put together the best case for the role of chemicals in controlling pests, acknowledging its weak-

nesses and shortcomings, and then put themselves on the line by taking that message to the media, to opinion leaders, to regulators and to legislators. The purpose is not to persuade people to like pesticides, but to persuade them to consider

many aspects of the issue before they make their decisions. That's when public perception of chemical risks, and ultimately public policy, will begin to swing back to the center.