

Brussels, 1 September 2008

New rules on pesticide residues to strengthen food safety in the European Union

The European Commission made today an important step forward in its efforts to ensure food safety in the European Union, as a regulation revising and simplifying the rules pertaining to pesticide residues entered into force. The new rules set harmonised Maximum Residue Levels (MRLs) for pesticides. They ensure food safety for all consumers and allow traders and importers to do business smoothly as confusion over dealing with 27 lists of national MRLs is eliminated. With the previous regime, different MRLs could apply to the same pesticide for the same crop in different Member States, a situation which gave rise to questions from consumers, farmers and traders. Regulation (EC) No 396/2005 is the result of a considerable joint effort by the Commission, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) and the Member States.

EU Health Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou said: "Today represents a milestone in our effort to ensure that food in Europe is safe. The new rules apply the principle that food produced or imported in one Member State must be safe for consumers in all of them. They ensure that pesticide residues in food are as low as possible and have no harmful effect on our citizens."

Clear system of setting MRLs

Consumers are exposed to pesticides because small quantities remain in harvested crops as residues. The amounts of residues found in food must be safe for consumers and must be as low as possible, by corresponding to the lowest amount of pesticide used on the crop to achieve the desired effect. A maximum residue level (MRL) is the highest possible level of a pesticide residue that is legally tolerated in food and feed.

The new Regulation covers approximately 1100 pesticides currently or formerly used in agriculture in or outside the EU. It lists MRLs for 315 agricultural products. These MRLs also apply to processed products, adjusted to take account of dilution or concentration during processing.

The new rules take into consideration the safety of all consumer groups. This includes, for example, babies, children and vegetarians. EFSA is responsible for the safety assessment, which is based on the properties of the pesticide, on the maximum levels expected on food and on the different diets of European consumers.

The need to revise

The previous MRL-regime was too complex as it combined harmonised EU and divergent national rules. This situation led to confusion about which MRL was applicable. It made the life of traders and importers difficult and gave rise to questions from consumers, particularly in cases where food exceeding the defined MRL in one Member State was acceptable in other Member States.

Control and enforcement

Farmers, traders and importers are responsible for food safety. This includes compliance with MRLs. Member State authorities are responsible for control and enforcement of the MRLs.

The Commission carries out inspections in the Member States to assess and audit their control activities.

Full transparency and accessibility

As from today, a database can be consulted on the European Commission's website to search for the MRL applicable to each crop and pesticide. This newly developed database is freely and easily accessible by every citizen, with a view to guarantee transparent and up-to-date information on the EU pesticide residues legislation.

To access the database, please visit:

http://ec.europa.eu/sanco_pesticides/public/index.cfm

For more information, please visit:

http://ec.europa.eu/food/plant/protection/pesticides/index_en.htm