OPD Reports From Europe

Pesticide Residues Scrutinized With Other Pollution Problems By EEC and OECD Membership

International coordination on the problems of control of pesticide residues and other forms of "unintended occurrence of chemicals in the environment" is beginning to become real in Europe with moves by the European Community and by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development, which also includes Canada, the US and Japan. The Community first became seriously interested in this problem, and its potential for affecting trade patterns, last March. Since then an expert committee has moved with exceptional speed to complete a draft set of binding regulations which could come into force in 1973 when the Community is expanded by the addition of new members.

The OECD approach is consultative and is designed mainly to share information about the problem and regulations. But the scheme will also give any member state the right to object when a regulation by another member threatens adverse economic effects.

Limitations So Far

So far such moves have been limited to the highly industrialized countries of Europe. But there is a growing move to bring developing and tropical countries into the picture, both for farm product and for public health purposes.

General Agreement on Tariffs & Trade in Geneva has issued a study on the trade aspects of the problem (OPD, 8/20/71, pg. 7). But there are also serious health problems in some countries which are kept under control only by the use of DDT or other pesticides which are under fire from conservationists and environmentalists.

Dr. P.T. Haskell, director of the new Center for Overseas Pest Research in London, believes there is a serious lack of evidence on the long-term effects of pesticides on tropical agriculture. The center is negotiating with several tropical countries now for investigations into such long-term effects.

There are also plans for other research teams to study safe, economic and efficient pest control techniques for the health and agricultural problems of tropical countries. This work is being supported by the Overseas Development Administration of the British Foreign Office.

The Community plan is the first multinational binding regulatory project of this type, reflecting the fact that in Europe pollution does not respect boundaries.

So far only the Community farm program has taken the form of binding control regulations; in other spheres, the Council of Ministers has preferred the practice of harmonizing individual national rules.

Agreement On Problem Difficult

But the problem of pollution is not really amenable to the harmonizing procedure which can allow nearly endless studies before any action is achieved. On the other hand, getting binding legislation through the Council of Ministers has always been difficult.

The OECD approach is based on the trade consequences of chemical control legislation. It cites a food importing country lowering permitted pesticide residues levels in such a way as to penalize the exports of another country. This also has been happening with tropical food exports and is a cause of serious, if largely unpublicized, concern in tropical countries.

Without comment on its "reality," OECD also mentions as a possibility that a country could discriminate against food imports and encourage pesticide exports by suitably varying its own internal regulations.

OECD has set up a Sector Group on Unintended Occurrence of Chemicals in the Environment as part of its larger Environment Committee. The sector group is concentrating first on mercury compounds, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), and, to the extent of the data, cadmium.

A two-year trial period has started on the new consultation scheme. Under this, every member must notify the OECD secretariat of a new regulation with complete data.

The details are sent for study to expert committees on "technical justification and economic implications." The results of these studies will be made known to all members.

Role of Secretariat

At this point, the secretariat can call a formal consultation or a member state which believes it may be adversely affected can request one.

If this procedure works well in eliminating international friction in a limited area OECD will consider extending it to other environmental measures. In addition to the three immediate chemicals for concentration, the sector will be tackling organochlorine compounds used in pest control.

While public attention has centered on the problem of pesticide residues and in some cases on any use of pesticides, Dr. Haskell in London notes that tropical countries still have serious pest problems for which control techniques are needed.

He cites locusts, weaver birds and particularly termites. Dr. Haskell notes that despite the vast damage caused by termites in tropical countries, there has been little research on control methods.

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MONS 071471