Pesticides: framework for Community action to achieve a sustainable use of pesticides

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PURPOSE: to propose a strategy on safer use of pesticides.

BACKGROUND: the use of pesticides is recognised as posing threats both to human health and the environment. Despite all the efforts that have been made to limit the risks linked to the use of pesticides and to prevent any undesirable effects, unwanted amounts of certain pesticides can still be found in environmental media (in particular soil and water) and residues exceeding regulatory limits still occur in agricultural produce. It is, therefore, necessary to reduce the risks from pesticides to humans and the environment as far as possible by minimising or eliminating, where possible, exposure and by encouraging the research and development of less harmful, including non-chemical, alternatives.

In order to address these concerns, the Commission is proposing a new strategy aimed at improving the way pesticides are used across the EU. It complements existing EU legislation controlling which pesticides can actually be placed on the market.

CONTENT: The main objectives of this thematic strategy are:

- to increase awareness of consumers and society at large about the possible risks from the use of pesticides has recently triggered actions by certain retailers and governments, as well as the Community, to support forms of agriculture and pest management methods that restrict or better target the use of plant protection products, such as organic farming, integrated pest management, or the use of less susceptible varieties. It is important to encourage a rational and precise pesticide use, as well as appropriate crop and soil management practices;
- to improve the behaviour of pesticide users (in particular professional users), who are responsible for a number of misuses including overuses, by ensuring better training and education;
- to improve the quality and efficacy of pesticide application equipment is also necessary to enable pesticide users to optimise the effectiveness of the treatments whilst minimising any adverse impact on human health and the environment.

Furthermore, the use of pesticides is affected – directly or indirectly – by legislation in other policy areas, such as water policy, agricultural policy, worker protection and research. The Thematic Strategy will allow the development of a horizontal and cross-cutting approach, well beyond the relatively limited scope of these specific legal instruments.

The specific objectives of the Thematic Strategy that would contribute to achieving the overall objectives are:

1. to minimise the hazards and risks to health and environment from the use of pesticides;
2. to improve controls on the use and distribution of pesticides;
3. to reduce the levels of harmful active substances including through substituting the most dangerous with safer (including non-chemical) alternatives;
4. to encourage low-input or pesticide-free cultivation, among others through raising users' awareness, promoting the use of codes of good practices and promoting consideration of the possible application of financial instruments;
5. to establish a transparent system for reporting and monitoring progress made in the fulfilling of the objectives of the strategy, including the development of suitable indicators.

The following measures of the Thematic Strategy will be included in a new Framework Directive of the European Parliament and the Council, which the Commission is proposing in parallel to this Communication:

- establishment of National Action Plans by the Member States which will have to set individual objectives to reduce hazards, risks and dependence on chemical control for plant protection (National Action Plans - NAP);
- involvement of stakeholders in the setting up, implementation and adaptation of the NAP;
- creation of a system of training of professional pesticide users in order to ensure that those who regularly use pesticides are fully aware of the risks linked to this use and take all appropriate measures to find the least harmful means for solving a plant protection problem;
- awareness raising of the general public (with particular attention to non-professional users of pesticides) through awareness raising campaigns and information passed on through retailers to ensure that it is better informed;
- regular and compulsory inspection of application equipment;
- prohibition of aerial spraying to limit the risks of significant adverse impacts on human health and the environment, in particular from spray drift;
- enhanced protection of the aquatic environment;
- defining areas of significantly reduced or zero pesticide use;
- handling and storage of packaging and remnants of pesticides and other measures connected to the handling of products in order to avoid that they are stored or handled carelessly and possibly pollute the environment;
- promotion of low pesticide-input farming and creation by Member States of necessary conditions for implementation of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) by farmers;
- Community-wide standards of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) will be developed and become mandatory as from 2014. Crop-specific standards for IPM will also be developed at Community level, but their implementation will remain voluntary, and Member States could support this activity under rural development;
- measuring progress in risk reduction through appropriate harmonised indicators, which will be made binding for all Member States for regular reporting;
- establishment of a system of information exchange at Community level – a Thematic Strategy Expert Group – involving the Member States and all other relevant stakeholders in order continuously to develop and update appropriate guidance, best practices, and recommendations.

In addition, the Commission will incorporate the following measures of the Thematic Strategy into two separate proposals to be adopted at the latest by 2008:

- improved systems for the collection of information on distribution and use of plant protection products, at the level of active substances, and regular reporting to tackle the lack of reliable data in particular with a view to the calculation of risk indicators;
- essential requirements for the protection of the environment to be satisfied by new pesticide application equipment to be placed on the market.

For the time being, the strategy only deals with the largest group of pesticides – plant protection products (PPPs). At a second stage, its scope may be extended to biocides once the impacts of the 1998 Directive on biocidal products have been evaluated. Biocides, e.g. disinfectants, wood preservatives and antifouling paints, are used to control other harmful organisms than those damaging crops or controlling plants.

The Strategy on the sustainable use of pesticides is one of the seven Thematic Strategies that the Commission is presenting, following the provisions of the EU's 6th Environmental Action Programme. The other strategies cover air pollution, marine environment, waste prevention and recycling, natural resources, the urban environment and soils.