

Pesticide Buffer Zones – Government adviser argue

The spectacle of two government advisory bodies squabbling over the risks of crop spraying could hardly inspire less confidence amongst a British public, already deeply sceptical about pesticide safety.

Last year the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution concluded that field spraying did constitute a potential health risk. It recommended that five metre buffer zones be set up as a precaution.

Now the Government's Advisory Committee on Pesticides says such buffer zones are not needed and would scare rather than re-assure the public. Instead, says the committee, more research on the subject of crop spraying is needed.

Challenging the findings of a Royal Commission in this way is extremely unusual.

If ever there was need for a precautionary principle, then pesticide use is the perfect example. It is simply not coherent for Professor David Coggon of the Advisory Committee on Pesticides to assert that if his committee "thought that current margins of safety for a pesticide gave insufficient protection to neighbours, we would recommend that the use be banned rather than relying on a buffer zone to reduce exposures."

Professor Coggon displays a rigid view of science which is not compatible with an increasingly safety aware – safety demanding – public. On matters of food and health there must be room for what he dismisses as "fear and emotion" in policy making.

There is a system of agriculture where pesticides are banned. It is called organic farming. A bold government would call for organic farming zones around residential areas and vulnerable sites such as schools.