



CONTAMINATION OF ORGANIC FOOD  
AND FARMING BY PESTICIDES:  
THE PROBLEMS AND LIMITATIONS  
OF CURRENT PROPOSALS AND IMPACT  
ON FARMERS

Lawrence Woodward

Whole Organic Plus and Organic Arable



- Organic regulation and pesticides
- Conflict with consumer perceptions
- The actual situation (as opposed to the politically biased one) of pesticide residue contamination of organic foods in the UK and the EU.
- How the systems developed by certification bodies and proposed by Defra are problematic for organic cereal farmers and will undermine the organic regulation.
- Problem of pesticide residue sampling and testing
- Organic Arable's proposals
- The issue of GM contamination will also be briefly looked at.



# Organic regulation and pesticides

- Organic standards and regulations have not been developed as a guarantee of pesticide residue free food. They are based on providing a description of the goals and characteristics of a method of production; one of which aims and seeks to guarantee that organic production uses only a limited and specified number of inputs
- The EU organic regulations require that measures are in place to avoid contamination by “unauthorised substances or products”.
- However, the Regulations do not rule out the presence of a prohibited substance where this may be explained in a way consistent with organic production methods; e.g. contamination such as spray drift out of the operators control
- “The Regulations do not specify what levels of prohibited substances might be acceptable in respect of contamination, nor is there any guidance from the Commission as to what levels of prohibited substances are, in this circumstance, consistent with the Regulations.”
- Defra and the EU are now attempting to clarify the levels and circumstances under which the presence of a prohibited substance in respect of contamination might be acceptable under the Regulations.



## Conflict with consumer perceptions

- Nonetheless, consumers generally perceive that organic food is and should be pesticide residue free. Most retailers acknowledge this would “to never knowingly put on sale any organic product containing ‘conventional’ pesticide residues.”
- The historical view of the organic movement and sector has been that if properly planned, converted, managed and inspected, the organic system can deliver more or less pesticide free food as well as other health, environmental and social benefits.
- To date this has, for the most part, been the case and the difference between the rigid pesticide free perception of the retailers and consumers with the more permissive organic system approach has not been problematic.
- However, in the wake of the globalisation of the organic market, the development of processing and product range and the industrialisation of organic production, problems are beginning to emerge. Pesticide residues are being found in organic products.
- They are at very low levels compared to the incidence in conventional products and are restricted to a limited range of products and situations.



## Pesticide residues in organic foods in the UK and the EU

- IFOAM EU claim that between 5% and 22% of organic products analysed contain pesticide residues and that “about 15% of organic crops show traces of residues” in The Netherlands.
- Misleading. 18% of the 1153 samples analysed contained pesticide residues: only 3% were above 0.01 mg/kg or 10ppb.
- The top 5 contaminated products were rice, sesame, coconut and peppermint and the majority of the highest contamination group were coffee, tea, herbs and spices.
- Imports - the vast majority from India, Turkey, Egypt and Vietnam (Italy?)
- Similar situation in Germany and Austria



## Pesticide residues in organic foods in the UK and the EU

- In contrast the UK's pesticide monitoring scheme, which includes organic food in its programme, shows been 3-5% of samples contain residues well below 0.1% (except fish in one year).
- Concern about organic cereal products in the last 4 years – Bread in 2007 (1 sample out of 6), Wholegrain Breakfast Cereals in 2008 (3 out of 12 samples), Bread in 2009 (2 out of 4 samples) and Oats in 2010 and 2012 (4 out of 6 samples).
- Oats and Morning Food products:
- Does not seem to be a UK farm problem: Elsewhere in system
- Failure of Defra and the certification bodies to sort this out highlights where problem is and why establishing residues tests misses the point



## Problem for farmers

The issue of adventitious/external and accidental contamination, which is not contrary to the regulations, is conflated with suspicion of the deliberate use of prohibited materials.

The criteria for “gaining suspicion”, the issue of adventitious and accidental contamination should be clearly separated and dealt with differently from issues relating to the deliberate use of prohibited materials.

Sampling for residues in cereals needs a different approach

Product should not be “put on hold”

Residue testing should focus on final product not on farm – which is what the consumer is concerned about