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Press release

Occupational exposure to pesticides: The current state of knowledge and the outlook for prevention and protection

ANSES and EFSA (the European Food Safety Authority) jointly organised a conference on occupational exposure to pesticides. The two-day event, held on October 28 and 29, was an opportunity to take stock of scientific and technical developments on the issue of pesticides and to discuss the challenges and outlook for assessment, prevention and protection. During the seminar, the recent ANSES Opinion on the effectiveness of personal protective equipment for plant protection product applicators and the EFSA guidance document on the assessment of risks linked to exposure to pesticides by operators and workers were presented. The conference ended with a round table for discussing the preventive actions to implement in light of the current state of knowledge and practices to minimise occupational exposure to plant protection products.

ANSES and EFSA have complementary risk assessment activities within the framework of the European plant protection product regulations. The two agencies therefore wished to organise a conference to review current knowledge regarding occupational exposure to pesticides and to plan joint actions for improving exposure risk prevention.

French and international scientists were invited to present various topics, including the contribution of epidemiology to understanding the effects of pesticides on health, the improvement of knowledge on exposure to pesticides and assessment methods, and the impact of technical and human factors on pesticides exposure levels.

Presentation of new study results and work

The conference was also an opportunity to review two recent publications. ANSES presented details of its Opinion on the effectiveness of personal protective equipment (PPE). Laboratory tests and a survey of farmer usage under real-life working conditions showed that PPE is not always worn because the equipment available is often perceived by users as providing a poor level of comfort and is not always suited to the constraints inherent to the activity at hand.

EFSA presented its new guidance document on the assessment of operator and worker exposure. This document establishes a methodology for guiding risk assessors and applicants in the industrial sector for calculating the risk for people exposed to pesticides through their work or their proximity to areas treated with these products.

The preliminary results of the AGRICAN cohort were presented as well as a progress report on the work of the expert group on farm worker exposure to pesticides set up by ANSES. The work of this expert group aims to provide a review of the available scientific data on certain specific exposure situations under real-life working conditions.

The conference ended with a round table which concentrated on the outlook for prevention and protection of users and applicators of plant protection products.

Overview and prospects for the future

Over 200 people attended the conference, during which scientists from Europe and throughout the world presented their studies, highlighting the significant progress made in acquiring data on occupational exposure to pesticides and in understanding the key factors and mechanisms that influence this exposure. The importance of applying this research in order to improve the methods and models used for assessing occupational exposure within a regulatory framework was highlighted. However, further work would appear necessary in order to obtain better understanding of practices, and consequently of exposure in real-life working conditions once products arrive on the market.

In addition to the progress made in understanding occupational exposure to more effectively assess risks, hazard reduction at the source and substitution were also discussed as primary avenues to be explored for prevention purposes.

Lastly, all those participating in the seminar agreed on the need to pursue this collaborative work and knowledge sharing with all those involved in research and regulation on the European level, as emphasised by EFSA's Executive Director Bernhard Url: *"Occupational exposure to pesticides presents many challenges for risk assessors. But, as this joint conference has shown, we will continue to best meet these challenges by pooling our expertise and working together. I look forward to further scientific cooperation with our colleagues at ANSES on this and other issues in the future."*

General Director of ANSES Marc Mortureux, shares this point of view: *"Science has no borders. Choosing between working or not working together with EFSA and other food safety agencies is simply not an option. Working collectively is an absolute necessity in order to efficiently assess risks and protect consumers."*

Summaries of the various seminar presentations can be found in the participant file, and are also available online on the ANSES and EFSA websites.

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