

Pesticide Safety and Social Concerns

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When Will Rodgers announced at the beginning of World War II that he was thinking about running for the office of president, he was asked what he would do about the German U-boats. He responded, "Boil the ocean and the U-boats will pop to the top." Immediately he was asked, "How can we do that?" He answered, "I'm responsible for policy, not operations."

Today, public attitudes on pesticide issues are very similar. While we enjoy the most bountiful, inexpensive, and healthful food supply ever, our concerns about pesticide safety have led us to a point where policy begins to part with reality. Fear and ignorance have led us to set an unachievable standard of absolute safety for synthetic chemicals. Politics, in response to anxiety, has erected a beguiling facade, unrelated to technological realities, to calm hysteria fostered by misleading information. We worry too much about the wrong things and are coming dangerously close to biting the hand that feeds us.

Are Pesticides Needed?

For more than a decade, antipesticide activists have been claiming that we can and should go back to producing food without using pesticides. However, these claims are not supported by those involved in the actual production of our food.

As Nobel Peace Prize winner Norman E. Borlaug has pointed out, the agriculture practiced in the 1930s was adequate to feed a world of two billion people, not five billion. To quote from one of Borlaug's recent papers—