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County removes pesticide guide

Group says tips on safe fruits, vegetables are 'misleading'

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By ANDREW SCHNEIDER
P-I SENIOR CORRESPONDENT

At the insistence of agricultural industry-sponsored groups, a wallet-sized consumer guide to which fruits and vegetables contain the most and least pesticides has been pulled from a King County Web site, where it had been a popular draw.

The informational card first appeared about a year ago in printed form and soon after on the Web site of the Local Hazardous Waste Management Program, a coalition of health and hazardous-materials agencies from King County, Seattle and 38 neighboring communities.

But on July 8, the program stopped handing out the consumer card and removed it from the Internet.

"The design of the card is flawed," said Jay Watson, who was named program administrator three months ago. "The information was oversimplified. It doesn't address the scientific uncertainty (of pesticides)."

Local and national health advocates strongly disagree.

"It is outrageous the pesticide industry is trying to prevent people from getting information that will help them make healthier choices about their food. We urge King County to make the information available to the public," said Ivy Sager-Rosenthal, environmental health advocate for the Washington Toxics Coalition.

Watson's comments on the card's design are similar to those expressed by Washington Friends of Farms and Forest, which repeatedly lobbied the county program to remove the information.

Heather Hanson, executive director of the 25-year-old organization, said the consumer guide was "misleading" and "harmed local farmers by saying you shouldn't buy apples and pears and peaches and the cherries -- all leading crops in Washington.

"It says, 'Don't eat locally grown stuff. Eat mangos and bananas.' "

When asked to point out where that was printed on the guide, she added: "OK, so it doesn't actually say that, but it could sure lead people to that conclusion. The average person looks at (the guide) and says, 'Hmm, I shouldn't buy this stuff. I should buy that stuff, so they're going to go to the grocery store and buy mangos.'"

On one side of the card are suggestions for "how to shop for the safest household products." The flip side is divided into two columns, one labeled "High pesticide risks" and listing 13 produce items, beginning with apples, carrots and celery.

The other column, labeled "Low pesticide risks" lists a dozen items, starting with asparagus, avocados

and bananas.

Not only does the guide not say to avoid buying local produce, it offers a link to another Web site sponsored by King County (pugetsoundfresh.org) that contains maps and directions to farms and farmers markets in 12 surrounding counties.

The rankings on the card came from data collected by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration in 51,000 analyses for pesticides in 44 fruits and vegetables.

But Hanson said the card is misleading.

"The role of USDA and FDA is to tell people to have a healthy diet and that's not what this card does," she said. "The government has the responsibility to regulate everything in such a way that food is safe, and I don't think that card contributes to food safety in any way, shape or form."

Hanson said her group represents farmers and growers from all different commodity groups -- from cranberries to wheat. When asked if the group received industry money, she replied, "It depends what you consider to be industry."

While the organization's board of directors does include someone representing wheat growers and the timber industry, some directors are employed by national and international pesticide and fertilizer producers.

USDA databases on pesticide studies are extremely complex, with detailed listings of each of the specific areas evaluated. Nevertheless, the data is widely distributed by consumer groups, food-safety activists and many state and local government agencies throughout the country.

Many of these organizations use a more easily understood presentation of the USDA findings by the nonprofit Environmental Working Group, based in Washington, D.C., which distributes about 100,000 copies of the guide each year.

The county guide also printed the address of the EWG Web site, which offers a user-friendly summary of the USDA data.

"The guides give consumers the information they need to make choices to reduce pesticides in their diets. They present information on the overall load of pesticides found on commonly eaten fruits and vegetables," said Sandra Schubert, government affairs director for the Environmental Working Group.

"I'm appalled that anyone, even an industry group, would try to prevent the public from getting information on how to reduce their consumption of pesticides," Schubert said.

Many farmers and growers are angered at the interpretation often made of the government-collected data and, in the past, Washington growers of apples, pears, peaches and other crops have argued, with some proof, that many have greatly reduced the amount and types of pesticides they use.

When the USDA was asked about its data in the past, the agency stood behind its accuracy and said it is an indication of what was found during extensive testing and analysis, but cautioned it should not be taken as an indicator of what exists on all crops, everywhere.

Watson said a large number of the cards have been distributed "and we're not going to make any attempt at retrieving them. But we're not going to print them in fire-engine red and green, or distribute any more until we've studied the issue and gotten input, including comment from the ag community."

He said a similar card will be made available at some point, "but I can't tell you when."

P-I senior correspondent Andrew Schneider can be reached at 206-448-8218 or andrewschneider@seattlepi.com. Read his Secret Ingredients blog at blog.seattlepi.com/secretingredients.

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