

Our food is safe to eat

By Mark Ross

The food we eat and how it is produced is never far from the news. The use of crop protection products and the residues that remain can evoke emotive headlines and spark unnecessary concern among consumers.

So it is pleasing to have assurances that the controls on agricultural products are working and that our food is safe, as highlighted in The Food Residues Surveillance Programme report recently released by the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI).

MPI manages our food safety system and undertakes monitoring programmes to demonstrate that the average New Zealand diet poses no safety concerns from chemical residues or contaminants.

The New Zealand National Chemical Residues Programme Report¹ released in May confirms that New Zealand follows good practice in using agricultural compounds and veterinary medicines. It also found **no** food safety issues.



MPI sets very conservative limits for residues in food. These are many times below levels that would be a risk to consumers. The residue monitoring programme includes meat, seafood, honey, milk and dairy products. Fresh produce for export and domestic consumption as well as many other commonly eaten foods are also included.

In total 3,013 samples were collected from around the country and tested for hundreds of agricultural compounds, veterinary medicines and environmental contaminants. Over 205,196 individual tests were conducted, with a compliance result of 99.98 percent.

Less than 0.02 percent of the results were non-compliant. Risk assessments were completed for each of these. The residues found were at extremely low levels.

As highlighted by the science community, many foods do not contain residues. However, when they do occur, foods are still safe to eat. Residue levels set by New Zealand legislation include a wide safety margin, well above any cause for concern.

These results are unsurprising, as we know our members work hard to satisfy the stringent requirements set by regulators. They also work with food chain partners to achieve the lowest possible residues in food.

Government and the researchers who monitor food residues do so using carefully considered processes. But much of the information on agricultural compounds and veterinary medicines reported to the public, by the media and other sources, is misrepresentative and based on poor science. Soundbites are used to peak public interest, but rarely communicate a precise reflection of actual amounts, effectiveness, or impacts of agricultural products.

The products that Agcarm members manufacture are safe and important to the sustainability of our natural environment. Good agricultural practice for crop protection and animal health results in increased food production. This results in high quality, less expensive food such as

fruits and vegetables. Producing more food per hectare is a better use of our natural resources and less disruptive to our environment.

Labelling of products and proper training is also imperative in ensuring residues remain as low as possible. Agcarm is committed to ensuring that labelling is clear and concise. Labelling is important because it provides directions on how to mix, apply, store, and dispose of a product. It tells you, for example, where the product can be used, what pest it controls, and how soon the food product can be eaten after an application. All this is linked to ensuring that residues in food remain at compliant levels. Training in how to use agrichemicals is also essential to ensuring residues are kept at extremely low levels, which are typically as low as one part per million.

As a New Zealander I am proud to be part of an agricultural industry that is world leading in the production of safe, healthy and sustainable food. Looking forward, it is important that we maintain our reputation and continue to focus on following good agricultural practice to ensure that we meet the ever increasing consumer demands for safe food.

- Mark Ross is chief executive of Agcarm, the industry association for companies which manufacture and distribute crop protection and animal health products.

ⁱ [New Zealand National Chemical Residues Programme Report](#)