Shooting down Dirty Dozen myth

By Graeme Peters

A recent article in the New Zealand Herald reminded me of the saying: “A lie gets halfway round the world before the truth has a chance to gets its pants on”.

The article was a magazine feature about food, obesity, and the importance of eating well and in moderation. It included some sensible tips on nutrition and foods to eat in greater amounts than others. It left you with the overall message that, as if we needed to be reminded again, we are what we eat.

But the article in the newspaper’s Monday magazine also included a segment on pesticides and this is where it went off beam. In a free plug for organics, the Herald reprinted the so-called ‘Dirty Dozen’ – an invention by an activist group to discredit conventional agriculture’s responsible use of crop protection products. Without sourcing the origin of the dirty dozen myth, or citing the science behind it, the Herald fingered 12 fruit and vegetables as the “worst culprits for being covered in pesticide sprays, and were a compelling reason to buy organic”. No attribution. No balance.

Journalists used to be taught to quote their sources, be they reports, agencies, or people. Most journalists are not experts in food science and, even if they were, should always cite the source of their material, especially if it appears to be of a whiffy variety peddled by a special interest group.

I should point out that the Herald’s daily edition is perhaps our best example of a newspaper that goes to the trouble of obtaining balance in stories. But in the Monday add-in magazine, The Dirty Dozen was reproduced as if it was the holy grail of food science, an indisputable fact which had been verified by teams of Nobel Prize-winning scientists.

Though the Dirty Dozen propaganda is rehashed around the world, its original source is from a United States organisation called the Environmental Working Group (EWG).

The EWG takes information from reputable government organisations, pulls it apart, and then re-presents it to suit an anti-pesticide agenda (alongside a Donate Now button).

After analysing the data, which lists the amount of pesticides present on common fruit and vegetables, EWG advises consumers to avoid 12 produce items that are commonly contaminated with “highly toxic” pesticides.

In reality, the analysis of the data is highly misleading.

The key point made by the Dirty Dozen is that there are dangerous levels of pesticides that can directly and negatively affect our health.

This is the opposite of the truth.

Consuming the amounts of produce required to ingest anything close to a toxic amount of pesticides is basically impossible.

We’re talking about residue levels in the margins of, in most cases, the limits of science’s ability to even detect them.

It's a minuscule amount, and we don't deny that there is some pesticide exposure, but it is, in the vast majority of instances, not representative of any possible health concerns from consuming a normal amount of fruits and vegetables.

There are a range of Dirty Dozens, but the one in the NZ Herald magazine included grapes, spring onions, celery, lemons, bok choi, wheat, nectarines, cucumber, oranges, pears, strawberries, and broccoli.

Let's take oranges. The most recent study I could find about pesticide residues on oranges was released in 2010 by the Ministry of Primary Industries (MPI).

In the study, 24 batches of imported oranges were tested for 58 different substances. Out of a possible 1,392 results, the test found 37 residues, one of which was a 'non-compliance'.

The amount of residue detected was 0.12 parts per million.

Remember, this is the only area of concern among nearly 1,400 possible samples. So, should consumers be concerned? No. According to a report from the European Union, which has some of the most stringent rules on food safety, the acceptable daily intake of this substance is 0.125 parts per million.

Acceptable daily intake is a measure of the amount of a specific substance in food or drinking water that can be ingested orally on a daily basis over a lifetime without an appreciable health risk.

Yes, these oranges contained residues of pesticides. But the residues were at extremely low levels, with the largest residue detected across nearly 1,400 tests still at a safe level over a lifetime of consumption. This is hardly justification for being slapped with a 'Dirty Dozen' label.

Indeed, the press release which accompanied the MPI data said that the agency had identified "no health or food safety concerns".

There are two concerns with the Dirty Dozen approach, including the fact that switching to organic will lessen a consumer's chance of coming into contact with pesticide residues.

Organic produce often has pesticide residues, some of the same compounds at trace levels that have been indicated on conventional produce, as well as organic-approved pesticide residues that many organic growers use to produce those crops

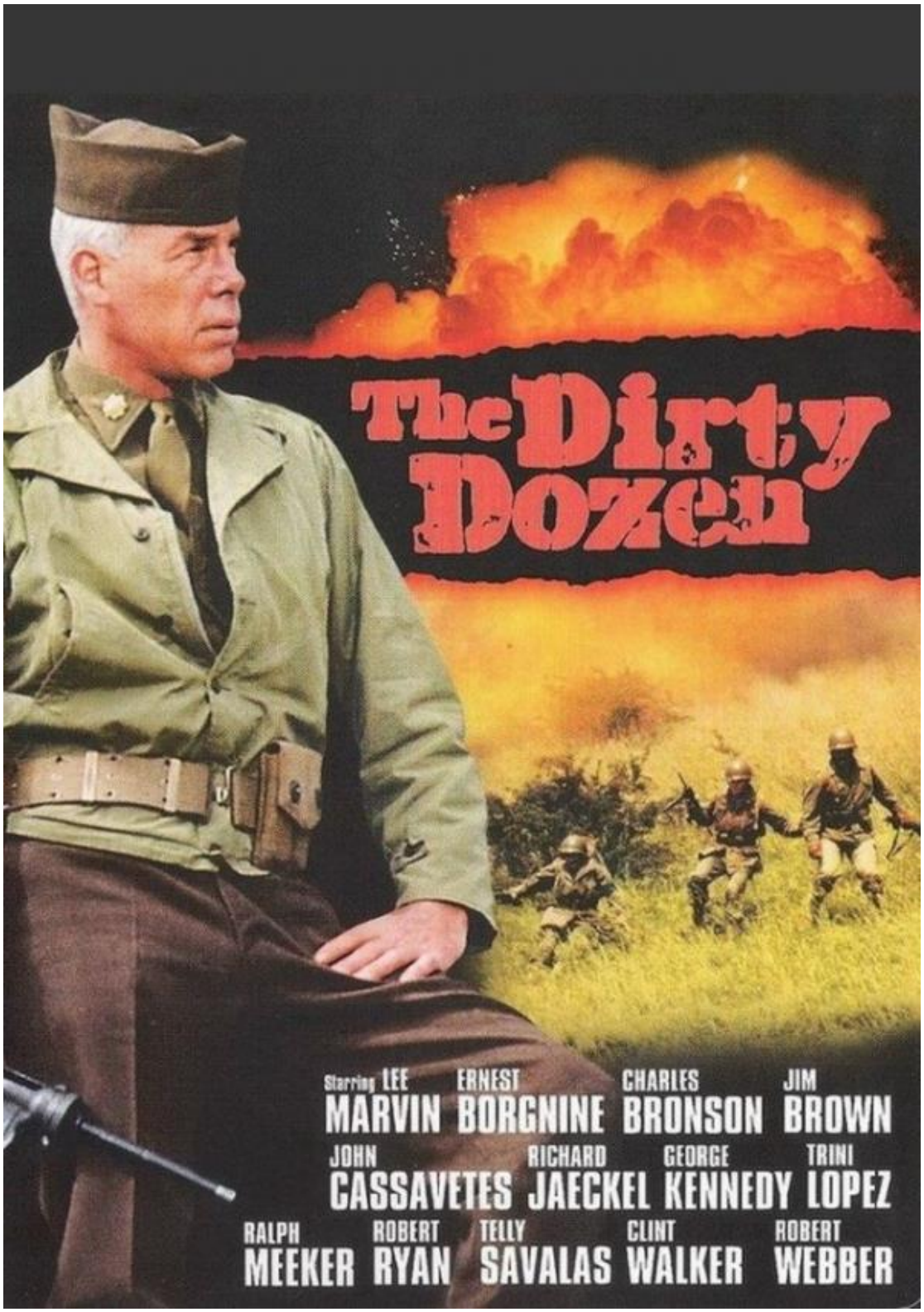
To suggest that organic produce is completely pesticide-free is inherently false.

The authors of The Dirty Dozen need to recognise that there is no value in seeking to promote organics by misrepresenting the facts around conventional agriculture.

Both systems have their role in responding to consumer demands and their contributions, but to advocate one over the other we don't feel gains anyone any advantage, and certainly it doesn't serve the consumer in any way."

What's most important is that consumers get the required five to 10 servings of fruits and vegetables each day. The decision to buy organic or conventional foods is a personal choice and pesticide residues are not something that should factor into it.

Caption: The Dirty Dozen worth looking at.



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