

Brand experts business in illegal pesticides

By Mark Ross

Internationally, trade in illegal pesticides has exploded. Made secretly and given names that sometimes resemble the original, counterfeits account for up to 30 percent of the pesticide market in India and 10 percent in Europe. These untested and unauthorised products are a threat to the farmer's health, harvest and environment.

There are three main areas of illegal activity in pesticides - fakes, counterfeits and illegal parallel imports.

Fake pesticides contain anything from water to banned or restricted chemicals. Sometimes they contain an illegal and untested copy of the active substance. These products are often sold in plain bottles with minimal labelling – usually missing health or environmental precautions.

Counterfeits are copies of legitimate, branded products, usually with high-quality labelling and packaging. Most counterfeits contain a copy of the original active ingredient. However, its biological efficacy is often diminished due to high levels of impurities from manufacturing, including process by-products. Counterfeits -- which are often difficult even for experts to distinguish from legitimate products -- are likely to be sold to agricultural producers and may result in adverse side effects, such as crop damage after application.

Illegal parallel imports are illegal copies of legitimate, parallel-traded products which have been repackaged and sold as brand-name products.

The Chinese piracy mafia has a broad network including between Europe and Asia and have made millions in profits. Dangerous counterfeit agrichemicals are illegally imported into the EU by vessel and aircraft from China. These goods are fraudulently mis-described on shipping documents and air waybills. These counterfeit, untested, unsafe pesticides are then distributed through the EU to unsuspecting parties who believe the pesticides to be genuine.

Pesticides are one of the most regulated products in the world today, and can only be traded and used in the EU if the products are proven safe and authorised. Despite this, the market for illegal pesticides in Europe means that at least one in 10 products sold is illegal. Tests have showed that the ingredients often contain banned substances, which are harmful to our health.

This is not a new phenomenon - illegal imports have been arriving in Europe for over a decade and hundreds of tonnes are seized every year. This is a huge amount.

In November 2015, a 12 day international operation discovered 190 tonnes of illegal or counterfeit pesticides in the EU. The operation, called Silver Axe, conducted 350 inspections at major ports in seven EU countries.

India loses about 4 percent, or over 10 million tonnes, of food output a year due to fake pesticides. India's fake pesticide industry is expanding at 20 percent per year. Counterfeits account for up to 30 percent of the \$4 billion pesticide market. Influential dealers in small towns peddle high-margin fake products to gullible farmers.

Farmers bear the brunt of the presence of non-genuine pesticides due to crop damages and low productivity, because the product does not work as effectively as the genuine product.

Due to the untested nature of the illegal pesticides and possible imbalance of active ingredient or no active or wrong active, these products also pose a danger to the farmer's health.

The other main concern is the irreversible damage to the environment by use of unmonitored toxic ingredients in illegal products. This can cause:

- Degradation of soil, rendering it useless for cultivation of succeeding crops.
- Ground and surface water contamination.
- Imbalance of natural flora and fauna and negative health impacts on humans and animals.
- When found, the safest way of getting rid of the products is via high-temperature incineration.

New Zealand's regulatory processes and agricultural systems have deterred these illegal products from our shores. Nevertheless, it is important for New Zealand's agricultural community to be aware of the possibility of illegal pesticides entering the country and to make sure that products purchased are legitimate.

Legitimate products should have a clear label with directions, registration number and manufacturing date. The packaging should be sealed and intact.

Only purchase products from well-known and trusted dealers, and be cautious of unknown brand names or labels. Always ask for a receipt and, if in doubt, check with the Ministry of Primary Industries or Agcarm.

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