According to the FBI, rifle fire was responsible for 723 homicides in the U.S. in 1994.[1] Assault rifles are a subclass of rifles, so homicides by assault rifle must number fewer than 723. The exact number is not known because government agencies keep national statistics on assault-weapon-related crimes. However, based on state and local police records, several scholars and advocates have estimated that assault rifles are used in about 1% of all homicides, which would make them responsible for about 7-25 deaths in the U.S. each year.[2] In an effort to save these 250 lives, Congress voted, in August, 1994, to ban the sale of assault rifles.[3]

Assault rifles kill an estimated 250 people each year and pesticides kill an estimated 10,400 people each year (see REHW #481), yet assault rifles have been banned while the use of pesticides is expanding. How does such a thing happen?

Could it be because assault-weapon opponents called for a ban and mobilized for a ban, whereas most pesticide opponents have never taken up such a clear, firm position? For years, most anti-pesticide activists have worked to restrict the use of pesticides through regulations based on good science. As a general strategy these activists have argued that 6 parts per million (ppm) is safe but 8 ppm is not, and they have successfully urged legislators and regulators to adopt this case-by-case, incremental approach. This general strategy, weighing the hazards of 6-vs-8-ppm, has now been embodied in a dozen major environmental laws, including the nation's pesticide laws, and has given rise to a new industry called "risk management." But other industries, such as meat, fish and dairy products (milk, cream, cheese, ice cream, ice milk, etc.),[4] have been mobilized for a ban, whereas most pesticide opponents have never mobilized for a ban and have now generally stopped taking their case directly to the public. They are back to debating 6-vs-8-ppm with the corporate PR-scientists and their acolytes within EPA.

Simply put, activists cut the pesticide issue in ways that don't get the general public fired up. The public can't get involved in a discussion of 6-vs-8-ppm. Even if the details of the argument were understandable to most people, which they are not, the goal of achieving 6 instead of 8 parts of poison in your soup doesn't seem interesting, exciting, or worth much effort. This leaves the debate in the hands of professional environmentalists and professional PR-scientists employed by the chemical and food corporations. These groups are both paid hefty salaries debating each other, while the public continues to be poisoned bit by bit without knowing what's going on.

Isn't it time the anti-pesticide "movement" recognized that its past efforts have failed because its strategies, its tactics and even its goals have been ill chosen? Likewise, isn't it time that some of the groups trying to stop the use of bovine growth hormone (known as "RBGH" or BST) learned the same lesson: debating risk and advocating better regulation or labeling simply hasn't worked AND CAN'T WORK. The public can't get excited about this approach, and without support from a goodly (and vocal) portion of the public, no anti-pesticide or anti-growth-hormone-in-milk campaign can succeed. This all seems obvious, yet for 25 years the 6-vs-8-ppm approach has been tried and tried and tried again. An entire generation of environmental scientist-lawyer-activists has failed strategy, working to achieve goals hardly worth achieving. In recent years large private foundations have been funding yet another "pesticide coalition" to pursue the 6-vs-8-ppm strategy with renewed vigor. This coalition is spending bundles of money, diverting the energies of the activist community (especially the grass-roots activists, who are wasting time AND losing funding to the big envirow groups as they participate together in the coalition), and preventing better approaches from being tried. Whether they recognize it or not, these foundations have put themselves and their coalition partners on the same page with the pesticide corporations, who thrive and prosper so long as the debate is restricted to 6-vs-8-ppm. Meanwhile the coalition's knowledgeable activists seem reluctant to point out that this emperor is parading in the buff.

The growing group of people who want to get dioxin out of the food supply (see REHW #479) aged yl examine these histories. The problem of pesticides and the problem of dioxin have similar features. How do people get dioxin into their bodies? According to EPA, we get about 90% of our daily dioxin dose by consuming meat, fish and dairy products (milk, cream, cheese, ice cream, ice milk, etc.).[4]

The source of 95% of the dioxin in our food is incinerators, according to EPA officials.[5] One obvious goal, therefore, should be to shut down all incinerators. (An alternative is to phase out chlorine as an industrial feed stock because chlorine gives rise to dioxin when it finds its way into an incinerator. This is a far larger goal, but would provide many additional benefits.) And who should...
be advocating for these goals? The food industry, of course. But they're not, because activists have not focused public attention on the very real dangers of dioxin in food. If the food industry were to feel some heat, some loss of profits, because of the deadly dioxin in the food they're selling, they would be motivated to go after the sources of dioxin. Suddenly the anti-dioxin movement would have some new, powerful (though uncomfortable), allies. It would be a new day.

--Peter Montague


