

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

An apple a day?

That may soon become a thing of the past, if the radical environmentalists win their fight to ban pesticides.

At a Sept. 7 Washington, D.C. press conference to release a report called "Alternative Agriculture," spokesmen for the National Research Council claimed that if pesticide use is vastly reduced or eliminated in this country, it will barely be missed, because so many chemicals are used on fruits and vegetables for only "cosmetic" reasons. When reporters for the fresh produce industry questioned this—and pointed out the simple fact that many consumers know that a blemished apple may rot faster than a clear one, the know-it-all NRC spokesmen dismissed this out of hand.

Now that the fall harvests are under way in the northern orchards, and the damage estimates are coming in from Florida, California, and elsewhere on prospects for fresh produce without chemical protection, the lies and exaggerations by the NRC become obvious.

First, take the case of Alar, the chemical used as a growth regulator that gives an apple a better appearance and prolongs shelf life. Because of an orchestrated public scare campaign this spring, the manufacturer of Alar, Uniroyal Chemical Co., took the product off the domestic market in June. The Environmental Protection Agency has proposed banning any food that has a residue of Alar as of May 31, 1991. The EPA has set January 1990 as a tentative time for banning the sale or use of Alar altogether.

What this all means, is that "an apple a day" is fast becoming a luxury for millions of Americans. For thousands of the orchards that have been coerced to stop using Alar, this may

be the last year of operation. In New York state, many growers are ruined. The apples have fallen to the ground early, and when picked up, can only be used for processing, at best. Instead of \$10 a bushel, the grower is getting \$2—less than cost.

The EPA has demonstrated no risks from Alar, but has moved to ban the chemical in response to "widespread public fears," about the safety of the food supply. The EPA said this spring, "There is not an imminent hazard posed to children in the consumption of apples at this time, despite claims to the contrary."

A scare campaign is now being run against the fungicide EBDC (ethylene bisdithiocarbamate), widely affecting fruits, vegetables, and some grains.

On Sept. 6, three chemical companies announced a voluntary restriction of sales of the chemical for more than 70 crops, leaving it available for use for about 13 remaining crops. The companies (Du Pont, Pennwalt, and Rohm and Haas) say they are seeking to avoid the hysteria expressed against Alar, but the results will be the same. The EPA is preparing a far-reaching ban on the fungicide, to be announced in the near future.

Fungicides are especially vital in Florida, where about half the nation's winter vegetables are produced—an annual harvest worth at least \$1.3 billion. In the warm, damp climate of the rich "mucklands" and other parts of Florida, only selected chemicals can protect the plants to yield good harvests.

In testimony to the House Agriculture Committee this June, a vege-

table grower from Naples, Florida noted that "organic" produce (grown without chemicals) costs twice as much as traditionally grown produce, and asked, "What are we as growers to do? We want to satisfy the concerns of all our consumers, but we also know that without the judicious use of chemicals, fruits and vegetables cannot be produced at the current volume and at a price that most consumers can afford."

The new, "voluntary" restriction of the EBDC applies to apples, citrus fruits, carrots, mushrooms, and lettuce, among many other types of produce. For most growers, the restrictions cannot be "juggled" between crops in a way for them to survive financially.

Last October, the EPA classified as potential carcinogens more than 70 of the over 360 pesticide ingredients licensed to be used on foods. The advocates of "alternative agriculture" assert that mass-scale banning of pesticides will not affect the quality or quantity of fresh produce, because other "alternative" plant and food protection techniques can be used (biological controls through predator insects, hardier plant types, etc.)

But on the scale necessary, such techniques are not within the financial or scientific farming options of the produce grower. The public is plainly being misinformed.

Richard Harwood of the Winrock Institute, a member of the NRC committee that authored "Alternative Agriculture," told reporters Sept. 7, "blemish-free standards on apples and oranges," should be relaxed. Protecting the "lustre on oranges," especially citrus for processing, "isn't important."

The rosy cheeks on a child from "an apple a day," are also not important to Harwood and his colleagues.