

BCPC CONGRESS 2016

Graham Matthews and Robin Blake report on the Congress

The theme of the BCPC Congress 2016 was “*Changes in European agriculture, the regulatory environment and Brexit*”. By the time of the actual Congress, the UK had announced that the exit from the EU would be before the end of March 2017. Lord Curry began the conference by commenting that the regulatory process was essential, what was needed was better, but less, regulation by encouraging voluntary initiatives and using regulation as a last resort. Regulations needed to be science-based and not on hazards as the current EU system is under **Regulation (EC) No 1107/2009**, but it is not known at present how difficult it will be to disengage due to Brexit. Clearly the EU does not want other countries to follow the UK in leaving, so the changes will take time. Other problems related to immigration and trade negotiations will have a higher priority. Nevertheless, with the Agri-food

industry so important in the UK, free trade, but not unregulated markets, will need consideration alongside efforts to increase the proportion of home-grown produce on a densely populated island. Emphasis post-WWII led governments to support increased production, but the success of this policy unfortunately led subsequently to a decision to cut back on agricultural research and extension, so agricultural production has plateaued. We now need a scientific investment to utilise innovation, such as exploring genetic modification of crops, to compete in world markets and improve careers with national qualifications.

Day 1 then had concurrent sessions, one reviewing the current regulatory product authorisation scheme in the North, Central and Southern zones and inter-zone harmonisation, alongside highlights from recent regulatory science research. The EU has set up a programme (AIR 2 and AIR 3) concerned with renewal of approval of active substances, as pesticides are approved for a maximum of 10 years. According to Chris Dent (UK Chemical Regulations Directorate, CRD) a large proportion of the work is with the UK in the Central zone, while in the presentation by Chara Panagopolou (Ministry of Rural Development and Food, Greece), France has a major role in the Southern zone. Some of the on-going issues relate to uses other than treating crops in fields, thus is there a new category for crops grown in walk-in poly tunnels? What to do with mixtures of pesticides? Changes in guidance documents also presented specific problems, such as dermal absorption and operator exposure, a requirement for new PEC calculations and specific groundwater requirements.

John Doe (Parker Doe Partnership LLP) pointed out that the decision to consider whether individual pesticides were endocrine disruptors has created even more controversy, with publications about this subject increasing since 2000. Under the present EU legislation, endocrine disruptors are banned as a hazard without a risk assessment based on exposure, with a few derogations permitted. There is much criticism of the present situation but it is not clear whether a consultation will overcome differences, especially when it will be difficult to demonstrate conclusive evidence of causality. One presentation by David Cowie (Syngenta) gave an overview of relevant exposure up front to prioritize and determine data needs and use a tiered approach to optimize resources. Such an approach allows an informed decision on human health safety as soon as sufficient evidence is available.

Good news came regarding residential exposure as a UK bio-monitoring study from the Institute of Medicine presented by Karen Galea. The study involved 21 farmers and 156 households within 100m of a farm field and indicated that over 80% of the biomarkers measured in urine samples were less than the limit of detection, whether it was taken at the time of a spray event or as a background assessment.



Lord Curry delivered the keynote address.



Panel discussion.

The presentation by Mike Coulson (Syngenta) on the neonicotinoids and bees confirmed that many studies had been carried out on doses many times higher than the amount of the insecticide found in pollen or nectar following application as a seed treatment. Such studies do not reflect the real exposure and risk to bees in the field. There is no doubt that the political decision to initiate a moratorium on the use of this group of insecticides was based on high mortality of bees when an antiquated design of a seeder was used that projected dust from poorly treated seed into the air. Improved seed treatment and retro fitting seeders to stop dust being blown into the environment has demonstrated the importance of correct application.

Concern about spray drift has led to 94% adoption of air inclusion (AI) nozzles as result of the campaign “Say no to drift”, but Dilwyn Harris (Dow Agrosciences) reported a new additive GF 3380 which has been shown to improve the drift reduction, even when using AI nozzles.

In the plenary session at the end of Day 1 three presentations covered future challenges by Robert Edwards (Newcastle University), the views of the Soil Association by Emma Hockridge and an industry view by Peter Campbell (Syngenta) on the EFSA environmental guidance document. Looking ahead, plant protection had to be smarter with real-time diagnostics of diseases, more integrated methods of control and adoption of genetic modifications to provide better defence against diseases as well as protection against insect pests. Inevitably, the Soil Association contrasted with the industry views and advocated organic farming, saying no to glyphosate and no till methods which are beneficial to soil fauna, saying no to GM crops, and no to pesticides such as the neonicotinoids. It was argued that a radical change was needed to reduce pesticide use by 98%, but was not clear how that fitted with the aim of maintaining production of food in the UK and not relying on imported produce.

The day ended with a workshop led by CRD, part of the UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and is summarised by Robin Blake –

With the recent announcement by the UK government that the exit from the EU would begin by March 2017, Sarah Shore and Jayne Wilder from CRD convened a workshop to get stakeholders views on the opportunities and risks for UK pesticide regulation.



One of the exhibitors.

The protection of human health and the environment, maintenance/enhancement of UK food security, and promotion of innovation and availability of necessary tools for both agricultural and amenity/non-agricultural uses were seen as key objectives of Pesticide Regulation. In future, pragmatic harmonisation but not ‘identity’ with the EU and other global regulatory authorities will be important to enable mutual recognition and a level playing field, with a focus on UK needs and the ability to trade with the EU and others.



Dilwyn Harris – Dow Agrosciences.

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It was considered important that the UK should maintain an effective voice and role in the EU, for example, through the role of CRD as a Rapporteur Member State (RMS) / co-RMS, setting of Maximum Residue Limit and import tolerances, and continued participation in standing committees and guidance development. Good communication with CRD is seen as very important both for applicants and others. In terms of potential changes there was a strong desire to move to a risk-based approach, taking account of socio-economic benefits, with simple, transparent, fast processes and science-based pragmatic, proportionate decision making.

Finally, it was clear that stakeholders want to ensure that UK industry is not disadvantaged by the Brexit process - the future UK pesticide regulatory regime needs to ensure that the UK remains competitive both in European and global markets.

Day 2 had no concurrent sessions and began with a description by David Williams (Defra) of developing the UK pesticides policy with support from the HSE to deliver the policy with the CRD. Within this policy there is an aim for a cleaner, healthier environment and providing help for a world-leading food and farming industry within a thriving rural economy. This aims for better regulation with less 'red' tape, and working internationally. At present, the initial frameworks for a 25-year environmental plan, and a 25-year plan for agriculture and horticulture to grow and sell more food overseas, have not been published due to Brexit. Many present thought these plans needed to be amalgamated! On pesticides, the need for a science-led approach was supported with a high degree of protection of people, but decisions had to be based on identified risks and be proportionate.

Taking a European perspective, the impact of hazard-based legislation was illustrated by showing the importance of 75 active substances. Hedda Eggeling (Steward Redqueen) pointed out that their application resulted in increased yields and profitability but without these pesticides, maintaining the same level of crop production would need a significantly larger area, with a distinctly unacceptable impact on the environment.

This was followed by a round table discussion on the EU review programme, led by Martyn Griffiths (Bayer SAS), Hans Mattaar (ECPA), Emma Jenkins (Dow Agrosiences) and David Cary (IBMA). The aim was to produce a wish list for the 'new' future. Some issues had already been discussed at the CRD workshop, but among points raised by the four speakers were the need for a re-think of data requirements, greater adoption of biopesticides and biostimulants as 'low risk' products, and more rapid adoption of new 'tools'. It was interesting to conclude the morning session with a report from a section of the European Commission, DG Sante, by Dara O'Shea on the implementation of the Plant Protection Products legislation. Its work has involved an audit of the activities of the Member States (MS). It was interesting



Simon Blackmore – Brighton BCPC.

that the audit recognised that the UK was very active, but the evaluation of pesticides was taking 200 to 300% more time to achieve relatively good compliance with deadlines. Overall performance of MS was inversely related to resources, with inadequate long-term planning or a plan to seek efficiencies. This has resulted in re-authorisation and other required work often being delayed.

In the afternoon information followed on emerging crop pests to challenge global food security (Dan Bebber, University of Exeter) and the need to diversify current plant protection practices to mitigate climate change effects (Piet Boonekamp, Wageningen). Perhaps the most striking presentation was on farming with robots (Simon Blackmore, Harper Adams University). Clearly the increase in size and weight of tractors and combine harvesters was severely compacting soils increasing the costs of ploughing which damages the soil environment. One answer is more intelligent targeted inputs on smaller fields and lighter equipment controlled robotically. Unmanned helicopters have been treating rice crops with pesticides in Japan for over 20 years, so there is already a precedent for further expansion of this technology.

The final papers from the NFU (Emma Hamer) and the AHDB (Jon Knight) were looking for pesticide legislation to be improved post Brexit, the agricultural and environmental policies to be merged and farmers incentivised to increase self-sufficiency and profitability. Consumers pay at too low a price for food, so support is needed as farmers cannot survive without help, both financially and also from research and extension services.

During the coffee breaks, delegates could visit the 17 exhibitors covering a range of regulatory, toxicology and environment consultancies. The Congress was attended by nearly 200 delegates and it is hoped that more will be keen to attend the next Congress on 2–3rd October 2017.