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Daily cost of 1p extra per child could end schoolchildren's exposure to cocktail of pesticides

A new report launched today by Pesticide Action Network UK (PAN UK) reveals that the fruit and vegetables given out to four-to-six year olds via a government scheme aimed at promoting healthy eating habits contained residues of 123 different pesticides.(1) These include suspected endocrine disruptors which interfere with hormone systems, known carcinogens, and organophosphates that can negatively affect children's cognitive development.

For an additional cost of roughly 1p per child per day, or £5.6 million per year, all of the core produce given out through the Department of Health's School Fruit and Vegetables Scheme could be switched to organic.(2) Not only would this better protect children's health, it would also provide much-needed support to the British organic sector.

"Our aim is not to alarm parents but they do have a right to know what chemicals are in the food being given to their children", said Nick Mole from PAN UK. "While we applaud the Department for Health's efforts to get children eating more fruit and vegetables, our research shows that the produce they are being given is generally worse than on the supermarket shelves. Given how little it would cost to switch the scheme to organic, the government shouldn't be putting our children's health at risk when there are other options available."

[*Food for Thought*](#) is published as children across the UK return to school. Every school year, approximately 2.3 million four-to-six year olds in England receive one piece of fresh produce per day as part of the £40 million scheme.

PAN UK analysed the results of government testing of the produce supplied through the scheme between 2005 and 2016.(3) In two-thirds of the items tested, residues of more than one pesticide were detected, with some individual samples containing as many as thirteen different chemicals. Despite evidence that young children may be at higher risk from the combinatory effect of multiple pesticides, there has been little research into what is referred to as the 'cocktail effect' and there is almost no understanding of the long-term health impacts.

"We know that young children are one of the groups most vulnerable to the health impacts of pesticides", added Mole. "Their bodies are still developing so exposure to certain pesticides at critical stages can lead to health complications in later life. The Department of Health urgently needs to switch to sourcing all produce for the scheme from producers using minimal pesticides, ideally British organic farmers."

One pesticide found in twenty percent of all samples - chlorpyrifos - is currently at the centre of a major row in the US. While the Trump administration has refused to ban it in agriculture, California State officials are taking steps to restrict its use, including increasing the distance from schools within which it can be applied. Exposure to low levels of chlorpyrifos has been shown to have

negative impacts on children's brain development. Since April 2016, it has only been approved for extremely limited use in the UK.

PAN UK's findings come at a critical time as the UK reconsiders its pesticide laws post-Brexit. For decades, pesticide standards have been decided in Brussels and there is widespread concern that they will now be weakened to please the agrochemical industry, resulting in more chemicals in British food.

"Brexit is a huge opportunity to prioritise human health by reducing the amount of pesticides in our food", said Mole. "But the Department of Health refuses to even discuss the issue of pesticides, let alone take any action".

Post-Brexit, PAN UK is calling on the Department of Health to start monitoring the health impacts of pesticide residues in food, particularly on vulnerable groups such as children.

"Given the body of evidence showing that pesticides do harm human health, it's astonishing that the Department of Health is not already taking steps to protect UK citizens".

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NOTES TO EDITOR:

- (1) The full list of the 123 pesticides is available on PAN UK's website along with spreadsheets containing all other original data and the complete 'Food for Thought' report. Visit www.pan-uk.org/food-for-thought.
- (2) Costings are based on a snapshot of prices for a like-for-like cost per kilogram, comparing the conventional produce given to children through the SFVS to their organic equivalents. At present the SFVS costs approximately £40 million per year, roughly equivalent to 10p per child per day. While some organic products are markedly more expensive than their non-organic counterparts, taken overall the difference in cost from PAN UK's analysis is 14%, including the added cost of switching to Fairtrade bananas. This would add an additional £5.6 million to the annual cost of the SFVS. This figure, when divided by the 2.3 million children the scheme reaches and the 190 school days on which they receive fruit and vegetables, equates to an additional costs of £0.013 per child per day.
- (3) The results of the most recent testing conducted by the UK government's Expert Committee on Pesticide Residues in Food (PRiF) on the produce given out through the School Fruit and Vegetables Scheme can be found at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/pesticides-residues-in-food-school-fruit-and-vegetable-scheme-2016-to-2017. Testing conducted before October 2015 can be found in the National Archives at: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20151023162737/http://www.pesticides.gov.uk/guidance/industries/pesticides/advisory-groups/PRiF/PRiF_Results_and_Reports/School-Fruit-and-Vegetable-Scheme-Introduction.