

Rational assessment improves regulatory systems, not sensationalised headlines

Australia has a globally recognised and acclaimed regulatory system for agricultural chemicals. These important tools for the nation's farming sector are some of the most highly regulated products of any industry. It is crucial that Australia maintains and protects its robust, independent, scientific and evidence-based regulatory system for agricultural chemicals and veterinary medicines, and equally important that we undertake critical assessment to identify and implement system improvements.

Recent media reporting on contamination issues with these products has instead been more about sensationalised headlines and factually inaccurate articles that overstate and exaggerate the situation using unnamed and unverifiable sources. While the reporting may be in good faith and have reasonable intentions, these articles are unfortunately misleading and deceptive. Hardly the hallmarks of professional and intellectually robust journalism.

Media commentary that sensationalises and misreports on the compliance activities of the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA), irresponsibly misrepresents the reality of the regulatory system and unnecessarily undermines public confidence in a world-class scheme. It is also reporting that seems to be deliberately obtuse to the high-level regulatory matrix to which agricultural chemicals are subjected.

Genuine fact-based critiquing of the APVMA's highly regulated system of registration, compliance and enforcement on crop protection products is encouraged as it can lead to beneficial regulatory improvements. But when it is driven by the media wanting to spin a good yarn or engage in activist style campaigns it does a disservice to Australian farmers, exporters and the broader community. More importantly, it undermines the foundation and argument for genuine improvement in the system.

The effective and targeted voluntary withdrawal and recall of non-compliant product resulting from retained batch sample analysis is an example of the Australian regulatory system for agricultural chemicals working properly. The suggestion, as was reported in the media, that the voluntary withdrawal and recall process is somehow 'self-regulation' or a 'quiet recall' because it didn't include a webpage notice, undermines the proactive nature of the process. A process that proved its value to the regulatory system utilising strong communication channels, involving hundreds of direct notifications and an extraordinary effort to have product removed from point of sale.

Australian consumers and our trading partners should take confidence in Australia's agricultural chemical regulatory system and its ability to withdraw and recall non-compliant product effectively and efficiently, on the rare occasion it is required. They can also take confidence from the professionalism of our farmers and the effective and safe use of these products.

The reputable industry goes above and beyond to ensure their products are safe, effective and consistent with the registered specifications of the product. Exaggerating to create unnecessary concern only diminishes and undermines the regulatory system, which then impacts the regulators' ability to respond to serious offences.

It is important to understand the differences between voluntary and compulsory recalls and associated APVMA compliance provisions. A voluntary withdrawal and recall is only able to be used when the APVMA determines there is no risk to the safety of human health and the environment from a product that does not comply with its registered specifications. Compulsory recalls on the other hand, are for products that have been deemed to be unsafe. The APVMA's provisions for a compulsory recall includes public notification, direct email notification, immediate cessation of sales and active return from users.

Articles trying to compare a compulsory recall of a food product that has been deemed to be unsafe, such as imported frozen berries, to a voluntary withdrawal of a crop protection product that has been deemed not to pose a health or safety risk, is mischievous or concerningly obtuse. The APVMA's compliance provisions for compulsory recalls are above and beyond the process undertaken by Food Standards Australia and New Zealand for the recall of contaminated food, and far beyond any measures available for consumer goods by the ACCC.

CropLife, as the national peak industry body for the plant science sector, continually seeks improvements, both in effectiveness and efficiency of the agricultural chemical regulatory system. Our advocacy in 2012 seeking greater APVMA compliance powers to tackle the problem of illegal and poor quality pesticides resulted in the APVMA gaining a substantial suite of new enforcement and compliance powers, the use of which have recently been on display.

Any adjustments to the regulatory system need to be undertaken on the basis of rational and fact-based assessment with the purpose of delivering better outcomes for Australian agriculture, which is something we have been doing for years and will continue to do in partnership with farmers and government.

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