

Working together for health: The BfR Forum discusses safe applications of plant protection products

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Plant protection products are safe if they are used properly and as intended. To help ensure this, the plant protection laws contain some strict rules. Accordingly: If the provisions laid down in the instructions for use, in particular the measures for risk mitigation, are complied with, affected parties (e.g. farmers, maintenance or harvest workers, residents and hikers) should not be endangered. A joint forum of the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) and the Federal Office of Consumer Protection and Food Safety (BVL) addressed the topic of “Using plant protection products safely and staying healthy” at the International Green Week in Berlin on 21 January 2020. The event was prompted by new health protection regulations.

“On the basis of assessment models agreed at European level, we estimate how much of a plant protection product is absorbed through the skin or the airways,” said BfR Vice President Dr. Roland Solecki at the forum. “In addition, the BfR is planning a study that will allow us to better assess the health risk posed by plant protection products for users and residents.” The purpose of the study is to further improve long-term health protection.

In 2018, the regulations governing risk mitigation in health protection were harmonised with environmental protection regulations. Health and environmental protection are now on an equal footing. In practice, questions arose regarding implementation, for example in viticulture or for fruit and ornamental plants.

At the forum, the authorities explained the scientific background and principles of risk assessment and management. In addition, users of plant protection products reported on their experiences. It became clear that provisions that are practicable and easy to understand are necessary and they should take account of the diversity within agriculture. During a subsequent panel discussion, representatives from politics, the authorities, cultivation associations and agriculturalists were given the chance to provide input. Also present were Friedel Cramer (BVL President), Walter Dübner (Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture), Alois Gerig (Chairman of the Bundestag Committee on Food and Agriculture), Dr. Carolin von Kröcher (Head of the Plant Protection Office, Hanover), Sibille Starke (Oehneland Agrargesellschaft mbH), Dr. Roland Solecki (BfR) and Jens Stechmann (Federal Committee on Fruit and Vegetables). The audience also participated and asked questions.

The participants concluded that the health of users of plant protection products must continue to be of high importance. At the same time, the practical needs of users should be better considered. Specially tailored solutions for individual types of cultivation are more practicable. The necessities for this are currently being developed by the authorities together with the cultivation associations and representatives of the German federal states (“Laender”). The process of discussion initiated on this topic was assessed as being very positive.

When it comes to assessing the health impact of using plant protection products, Europe-wide harmonised guidelines are used. These were published by the European Food Safety Authority EFSA. They are based on numerous measurements in which the external exposure of affected groups of people was determined under real-world conditions. In order to make the calculations even more realistic, the BfR is planning a long-term scientific study on the exposure of users and residents, on behalf of the German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture, and which should determine the absorption and excretion of the active substances.

The idea that manufacturers of plant protection products should submit special measurements for approval was also discussed, for example how quickly the products are broken down on the plants.

Advice and training are another way to further increase the acceptance of the application regulations among users of plant protection products. All participants agreed to continue in cooperation and each contributing in the interest of health protection.

Further information on plant protection products is available from the BfR website

https://www.bfr.bund.de/en/plant_protection_products-579.html

<https://www.bfr.bund.de/cm/349/better-assessment-of-pesticide-residues-with-digital-tools.pdf>

About the BfR

The German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) is a scientifically independent institution within the portfolio of the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL) in Germany. It advises the German federal government and German federal states ('Laender') on questions of food, chemical and product safety. The BfR conducts its own research on topics that are closely linked to its assessment tasks.

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