

PRESS RELEASE

**Government's top-level committee on food safety continues to delay and prevaricate on implementing JPC recommendations.
Passes on the buck to other committees**

Industry calls the shots, while concerns of public health are ignored

New Delhi, November 19, 2004: It was an exercise in futility, yet again. Ten months after the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) endorsed CSE's findings on pesticide residues in soft drinks, the Central Committee for Food Standards (CCFS) met here today ostensibly to decide on setting pesticide residue standards for soft drinks (carbonated beverages). But it ended with another round of prevarications and delaying tactics. Instead of taking a final decision, the CCFS decided on the amazing recourse of referring the matter to another expert committee! Shockingly, this committee does not even exist -- it has not yet been constituted fully.

This clearly shows that the government does not have the necessary will power to decide in favour of public health, and is being led astray by the industry. This makes the recent order of the Rajasthan High Court all the more relevant, since it puts the onus clearly on soft drink companies. In its October 8 judgement, the court ordered Coca-cola, PepsiCo and other soft drinks companies to display the ingredients and pesticide content in their bottles on the labels of their products.

In the last meeting of the Pesticide Residue Sub-Committee -- PRSC, one of the sub-committees of the CCFS -- held just days after the release of the JPC report which had, it was agreed that the Sub-Committee would examine the issue of composite standards for soft drinks so that the CCFS could then take a final decision on this matter.

The PRSC, after listening to Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and soft drink associations, which it termed as 'stakeholders', decided that it will undertake a nation-wide monitoring of soft drinks for pesticide residues before finalising the standards. Strangely, this list of stakeholders did not include either CSE or other non-government organisations and consumer groups.

In today's meeting, CCFS was to decide on the PRSC's recommendations. Instead, it referred the task to a partially existent expert group. Said S R Gupta, Deputy Director General (PFA), Ministry of Health and Family Welfare: "We have requested N K Ganguly (Director General, Indian Council of Medical Research) to chair the expert group."

On the issue of setting standards for caffeine levels in soft drinks, the CCFS chose -- again -- to refer the matter to a sub-committee. In fact, no discussion was allowed on this matter by the CCFS chairperson. All the remaining recommendations of the JPC were similarly passed on to various other committees.

CSE, after perusing the report of the first PRSC meeting, had sent a letter to all members of the CCFS outlining some key issues of concern which it felt should have been discussed in today's meeting. But very conveniently, this letter went completely unacknowledged.

The CCFS claims to be the apex and technically most competent body in the country for setting food safety standards.

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