

PRESS RELEASE

CSE rejects offer to meet Coca-Cola. Says process has been compromised

- **Had initially agreed to meet in good faith. But will not do so now, since public policy is compromised**
- **Believes these are nothing but efforts to delay and prevaricate on standards**
- **Sends Union health ministry point-by-point response. Says no substance in the charge that CSE report is “inconclusive” or “inconsistent”**

New Delhi, September 6, 2006: Protesting the double standards of the soft drinks industry and the inordinate delays in setting norms, Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) has rejected an offer of a meeting extended by Coca-Cola.

On August 16, Coca-Cola had invited CSE to a meeting to discuss the issue of pesticide residues in its products. CSE had, initially, agreed to the meeting – but on the condition that the agenda be confined to regulations. Clarifying CSE’s position, its director Sunita Narain said: “Our initial response of acceptance to the meeting was in good faith, believing that the company was genuinely interested in a dialogue on how the process of regulation and standard setting would move forward. But recent events since then make it clear that public policy is being compromised, and therefore, we cannot see the purpose of a meeting between Coca-Cola and us.”

In its letter to the CEO of Coca-Cola India, CSE has explained why it believes public policy has been compromised. The report of the expert committee of the Union ministry of health and family welfare was “based verbatim on the comments of the scientists that (the) company had flown down from London.” Furthermore, CSE says its “response to the expert committee report will make it clear that the evidence used to discredit (its) report is based on what can be, at best, called misinterpretation of scientific data and at worst, a deliberate and well-orchestrated strategy to thrash (its) analysis and work”.

CSE has reiterated its concern that these tactics to delay and divert are not new. It has reminded the Coca-Cola CEO how on March 29, 2006, the critical meeting of the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) convened to finalise standards for carbonated beverages was sought to be stymied. How a letter dated the same day, written by the Union health secretary asking for the standards to be deferred, was in the knowledge of the cola majors. This evidence of collusion, CSE says, “shocked” all. But sadly, nothing has changed. CSE’s letter makes it clear that this is an effort to delay and prevaricate on notifying standards already finalised by the BIS so that the process can move towards validation of the test methodology.

CSE concludes: “In these circumstances, we have little to discuss with your company. We therefore, offer you our regrets for not accepting your offer to meet.”

CSE has also sent a detailed point-by-point rebuttal of the expert committee report to the Union health ministry, which makes it amply clear that this is nothing but a well-orchestrated campaign of vilification. The Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) had cleared and endorsed every aspect of its 2003 study. CSE's current study has followed exactly the same methodology and given similar results – and yet this campaign is underway. “If anything, we have gone a step further and reconfirmed our findings through a GC-MS as was suggested by the JPC. We, therefore, believe that any further enquiry in this matter is unwarranted and will divert the attention from the main issue: regulation of these products,” says CSE.

After careful scrutiny of the report of the expert committee, CSE says in its reply: “We do not accept that it is justified to say that our report on pesticide residues is “inconclusive” or even “inconsistent”. The fact is that there has been a careful and deliberate attempt to misinterpret our report or to find fault where none exists”. CSE has given three examples to elaborate its point:

- The expert committee's claim that the CSE report was “inconclusive” was based on misinterpretation. The fact is that CSE has used the GC-MS laboratory equipment to reconfirm the identity of the pesticides and not to quantify it, as claimed by the ministry. In fact, CSE has used other equipments – the GC-ECD and the GC-NPD – to identify, quantify and even confirm the pesticides.
- The expert committee's claim that the CSE report is “inconsistent” is based on incorrect understanding of tropical toxicology. The ministry's committee has parroted the contention of Coca-Cola sponsored scientists that it is unlikely that the samples could have had residues of HCH isomers or Heptachlor as it has been banned since 1996. CSE, in its reply, has given detailed references of studies conducted by the ministry's own scientists, which have detected the same pesticides. “Therefore, unless all studies done in India are wrong, the CSE study cannot be dismissed as inconsistent,” says its reply.
- The expert committee's claim that the CSE report should not have found Malathion shows complete disrespect and dismissal of the JPC report, which had discussed this issue and resolved it clearly. It reveals that the intent of the expert committee is not to conduct an impartial enquiry but to persist in raising unwarranted issues against CSE and its laboratory, and to discredit and harass its scientists.

CSE has appealed to the ministry that standards for the final product should be notified urgently. “It is not enough to issue advisories against the health aspects of soft drinks, it is equally and more imperative that we set regulations so that people are reassured of their safety”, says its letter to the ministry.

See the CSE letters to the CEO of Coca-Cola India; Union minister, health and family welfare; and its rebuttal to the expert committee report at <http://www.cseindia.org/misc/cola-indepth/cola2006/cola-index.htm>

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