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EMBARGO: 14h00

Brussels, 15 October 1984
Dublin

SUMMARY

ENVIRONMENT AND CHEMICALS IN AGRICULTURE

Opening speech by Dr. Karl-Heinz NARJES
Member of the Commission of the European Communities
at the Symposium in Dublin, 15 October 1984

As the member of the EC Commission responsible for internal market and environment protection Mr NARJES addressed representatives from governments, environmental and agricultural associations chemical industry, consumer groups and the research community as an ideal forum where the different points of view can be fruitfully confronted and priorities for future actions can be identified.

"We have to face up to the need to reduce environmental problems resulting from the use of agrochemicals", he said.

Agricultural chemicals make up for 10 % of total production of the chemical industry in the EC; 60 - 70 % of the Community budget is devoted to the CAP while less than 0,1 % of this budget is devoted to the environment.

There is no doubt that the current levels of use of pesticides and fertilisers have had undesirable or unacceptable impacts of the environment.

When the goals of the CAP were defined in 1957 the potential danger of the environment posed by modern agricultural practices was not yet recognised, he continued.

The key orientations of the Community's environment policy, adopted in 1983 (integrating environment policy with other policies, including specifically agriculture ; prevention rather than cure; optimum use of resources) are important also in this respect "even if some possible areas of conflict may exist":

"It is agriculture which has in the past created and conserved the environment that we treasure today, and agriculture is the industry which, more than any other, has need of a healthy environment", he stressed. The crucial question is: "how can agriculture continue to profit from use of chemicals without creating an intolerable burden on the environment"?

Science is far from precise on the short- and long-term effects on health and environment from pesticides:

According to recent research in the USA, for 38 % of the pesticides presently on the market, no information on toxic effects exists which would allow the determination of their hazard to people and the environment, and for 26 % the minimal amount of information available is nowhere near enough to permit an assessment of their hazards.

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The large diversity in the pesticides market reflects the complexity of the problems encountered in the chemical control of agricultural pests and diseases. There are strong pragmatic reasons from the point of view of agricultural production which justify a change in the use of pesticides, and there are strong environmental arguments for a reduction in their use.

The technological innovation in the field of agrochemicals to develop highly selective and non-persistent pesticides and in the field of integrated pest control will surely play an essential role in minimising the environmental impacts deriving from the use of pesticides.

New scientific findings and developments can help to optimise the use of fertilisers through a better knowledge of soil properties and plant physiology.

All actions and programmes in this field should take into account the variety of situations in the European Communities, in particular the diversity of natural ecosystems and cultivation techniques, the differences in the levels of development of agricultural practices and levels of knowledge of farmers, and current state of research and technological innovation.

Mr NAJRES called for fostering training and information to farmers and agrochemical distributors in order to ensure the transfer of more research and technological innovation into agricultural practices and also to ensure the use of plain common sense to limit the over-use of chemicals. Advice centres at local and regional level have to be strengthened in all Member States.

Finally the appropriate consumer education can teach that good quality does not necessarily mean good shape or attractiveness and that minimum content of pesticides and other pollutants is far more important in terms of human well-being than the exterior qualities.