

Honourable Jean-Yves Duclos,
Minister of Health
Health Canada
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0K9
Sent by email to: pmra.publications-arla@hc-sc.gc.ca

Re: Targeted Review of the *Pesticide Control Products Act*, Discussion Document DIS2022-01

The Organic Council of Ontario (OCO) represents over 1400 organic operators in Ontario, Canada's largest domestic organic market, valued at over \$980 million in 2020. The following letter is in response to the Government of Canada's Consultation on the Targeted Review of the *Pesticide Control Products Act*, Discussion Document DIS2022-01.

In the Discussion Paper prepared by the Pest Management Regulatory Agency (PMRA) outlining the proposed targeted changes to the *Pest Control Products Act* (PCPA), the following three key objectives are presented as driving the amendments to the Act:

1. Further strengthening human health and environmental protection by modernizing business processes governing pesticide reviews;
2. Improving transparency and stakeholder accessibility to information to bolster meaningful participation in decision-making; and
3. Increasing the use of real-world data and independent advice in the decision-making process to better inform decisions to protect human and environmental health.

While these key objectives in and of themselves are not objectionable, the Discussion Paper critically lacks key details of precisely how legislation and regulations may be changed to facilitate these objectives. OCO shares the concerns expressed by other stakeholders around the lack of detail presented around the practical realities of these amendments. OCO agrees that any amendment made to the PCPA must be extremely targeted and narrowly focused to avoid undermining the very premise of the Act, which is to protect human health and the environment from the risks of pesticides.

In particular:

1: Limit interpretation of “low-risk products” when opening a new authorization pathway under the Act

While OCO agrees with the motivations expressed in providing this new authorization pathway for very low-risk products, such as those used in organic agriculture, OCO is concerned about

how this category will be defined in practice. Clear, strict, and narrow criteria will be required directly in the statute to limit access to this authorization pathway and prevent inappropriately opening a loophole that could allow higher-risk products to evade regulation. Additionally, public consultation requirements and special review mechanisms existing under the current Act should be expanded to apply to products that make use of this authorization pathway.

2: Amend the process for determining Maximum Residue Limits (MRLs)

OCO was dismayed to see the government's move to increase MRLs for glyphosate in 2021. Increased use of glyphosate products increases contamination risk to organic crops, threatening the organic supply chain, and potentially severely compromising the competitiveness of Canada's organic product to valuable international trading partners such as the European Union, where regulations are stricter.

MRLs should be incorporated into the registration process, not considered a separate decision. Any changes to the MRL should be considered as a registration/authorization decision, unless the proposed change is a lowering of the MRL. Any increase in the MRL fundamentally increases exposure and should trigger a new risk assessment. Furthermore, increases to MRLs should occur only on a very limited basis, when it can be clearly demonstrated that there is absolutely no other viable alternative in the form of alternate products or pest-control practices.

The development of pesticide-resistant organisms should not be considered a strong rationale for increasing MRLs, as they produce a cycle of dependence incompatible with the purpose of the Act. Increasing resistance indicates the value of the substance as a pest control product is diminishing. Development of product resistance will only accelerate with increased product use, meanwhile increased exposure to the product increases human and environmental risks.

3: Establish permanently-funded mechanisms for independent data collection in the Act, and make all collected data fully available to the public without the need for individual access requests

OCO applauds the expressed intent to develop a national water monitoring program for pesticides, as well as a systematic approach to gather crop production and pesticide use data. Reducing reliance on third-party data to make decisions is critical; independent data collection and interpretation should be expanded, and independently collected and interpreted data should always be the final arbiter of risk assessments to reduce informational bias.

OCO would like to see this data collection expanded to include monitoring of pesticide levels in the air, including impacts of pesticide drift on neighboring farms (a particular concern for organics) and surrounding wildlife. Additionally, better biomonitoring of pesticide levels in humans should be implemented. This data collection and interpretation should be fully publicly funded, and permanent funding for these activities should be enshrined in the Act. This data should be made publicly available by default and not require any individual to submit a special request for access.

4: Follow suit with other jurisdictions and produce a federal plan to reduce pesticide use

Canada should follow the lead of international partners making firm commitments to reducing pesticide use. For example, the European Union has committed to reducing pesticide use by 50% by 2030. OCO strongly supports an equivalent commitment in Canada, and recommends significantly increasing investment in organics as a mechanism to support such a commitment.

In building naturally pest-resilient agroecosystems through a strong emphasis on soil health, organic production substantially reduces the need to use pesticides. What few pest-control substances are permitted under the Canadian Organic Standards are typically minimal-risk. Furthermore, organic food and beverage products are one of the fastest growing agri-food sectors, reaching \$112 billion USD (~\$142.3 billion CAD) in sales globally in 2019, with the North American market accounting for nearly half of these sales. Global and domestic demand for organic products increased through the pandemic, fuelling sector growth. Canada is the sixth largest organic market in the world, and the ninth highest per-capita consumer of organic products globally. Canada's organic retail sales were over \$8.1 billion in 2020, an increase of 14.9% from 2017. 66% of Canadians purchase organic products on a weekly basis.

As such, investing in Canada's organic sector to help farmers overcome financial barriers to transition is a double-win: such a move would facilitate mitigating the risk of pesticide products to Canadians and the environment, while unlocking a lucrative market for Canadian farmers whether they sell domestically or abroad. Such an investment would not be unprecedented; parallel to their commitment to halve pesticide use by 2030, the EU has also committed to expanding the amount of agricultural land under organic production from approximately 8.5% to a minimum of 25% by 2030.

OCO hopes that Health Canada and the PMRA will proceed in a conservative fashion, following the precautionary principle to fulfill their mandate of protecting Canadians and the environment from harm. Canada's organic sector is incredibly valuable, and the ability of the sector to thrive and compete may be limited by expanded use of organic-impermissible substances. Simultaneously, however, organics provide a clear model for reducing the use of pesticides, limiting their risks without harming economic competitiveness. Sustainable shifts away from pesticide dependence are possible, and organics are a critical knowledge incubator and leading model of responsible pest control in agriculture; supporting the sector to modernize and improve efficiency supports the establishment of an innovative path that stands to benefit all of Canadian agriculture.

Signatures:



Carolyn Young
Executive Director
Organic Council of Ontario
The Voice for Organics in Ontario

The Organic Council of Ontario (OCO) is the Voice for Organics in Ontario. We represent over 1400 certified organic operators, as well as the businesses, organizations, and individuals that bring food from farm to plate. We work to catalyze sector growth, support research, improve training, increase data collection, encourage market development, protect the integrity of organic claims, and inform the public of the benefits and requirements of organic agriculture.