



THE FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY & COI

CONSUMER INFORMATION NEEDS REGARDING PESTICIDES
STAGES I AND II
(COI 269197)

FINAL REPORT

Prepared for: COI
Hercules House
Hercules Road
London SE1 7DU

On behalf of: Food Standards Agency
Aviation House
Kingsway
London WC2B 6NH

Project Basil
f085
August 2006

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

- Qualitative research was commissioned to explore the information needs of consumers regarding pesticide residues in food, what the Food Standards Agency (FSA) needs to do to meet those needs, and what other organisations – including Government Departments, retailers and assurance schemes – could do to meet those needs
- The research was conducted in two stages. Stage I explored consumers' reactions to a range of information material supplied by the FSA. Stage II built on the Stage I findings, focusing on proposed materials on pesticides and pesticide residues for the eatwell.gov and food.gov websites
- Stage I comprised 8 extended creative groups, structured according to the segmentation suggested in previous research: Avoiders (1 group), Mainstream (5 groups – including 1 BME) and Discerners (2 groups). Each group comprised a mix of gender, lifestage and SEG; all had sole or shared responsibility for food shopping, and at least half had sole or shared responsibility for cooking; all bought fresh fruit and vegetables; the majority were internet users.
- Stage II comprised 56 30 minute interviews with Mainstream respondents, conducted in-hall, and 10 1 hour depth interviews with Discerner respondents. (Avoiders were excluded as unlikely to have information needs.) Other sample requirements were as for Stage I, except that all respondents were internet users.
- Fieldwork took place in January and February 2006 (Stage I) and July 2006 (Stage II). The locations were Altrincham, Walthamstow, Redditch, Glasgow, Dundee, Cardiff, Colwyn Bay and Belfast (Stage I) and Bracknell, Croydon, Sutton, Cardiff and Edinburgh (Stage II).

Key Findings – Stage I

- Pesticides and pesticide residues were not top of mind among the majority of respondents, so there was a low level of incoming concern about the issue. This level of concern – especially about pesticide residues **in** food – rose steeply as the topic was introduced and as more information was given to respondents, although it subsided again to a significant extent towards the end of the groups: sometimes because respondents felt reassured by the information provided; sometimes because they resigned themselves to the (perceived) fact that there was little they could do about pesticides and their residues.
- During the discussions, respondents raised a wide variety of questions about pesticides and pesticide residues (e.g. what sorts are there, what are their effects, what can I do), but ultimately identified their main information need as wanting to know that pesticides / pesticide residues are safe.
- Respondents were shown a series of ‘Level 1’ information units covering issues such as ‘What are pesticides?’, ‘Pesticide residues in food’ and ‘How are pesticides regulated and controlled?’. More detailed Level 2 and Level 3 information was available as required. Most felt that Level 1 was adequate to their needs. Some felt it offered more than they wanted / needed to know, though some wished to go further – indicating the value of a ‘layered’ approach to information provision.
- Responses to the information units, and to examples of information provided by other sources, gave important guidance on content, tone, style and presentation requirements, which is discussed in the Detailed Findings.
- Government departments and agencies were thought to be appropriate and relatively trustworthy sources of information – including the Food Standards Agency. Where known, assurance schemes were also relatively trustworthy, but suffered from lack of detailed awareness. Retailers and campaigning organisations were felt to have their own agendas, while pesticide manufacturers were generally not trusted as a consumer information source.

- Respondents looked to labelling as an obvious (albeit not practicable) channel of information, but also suggested a number of other channels, including the internet as well as advertising and point-of-sale materials.

Key Findings – Stage II

- As in Stage I, pesticides and pesticide residues were not a top-of-mind concern for the majority of respondents, and again there was particular focus on residues **in** food. The majority showed at least some concern over the issue, with a minority very worried, and a minority not concerned at all.
- A wide variety of questions / information needs was raised by respondents (similar to Stage I), with the internet seen as the most likely channel to meet these needs. It should be noted that only a minority felt that they would spontaneously seek out information, but that a media scare story about pesticides could trigger a desire to know. But, whatever their personal interest in knowing more, there was agreement that the public had a right to know, and that genuine, honest information should be available to those who sought it.
- Respondents were shown information materials in Q&A format, offering varying levels of complexity and detail. The format was liked, and it was clear that respondents favoured straightforward, well organised, usable information, written from a consumer / human angle, that could inform their food purchasing and preparation – with the opportunity to delve further, if they wished.
- Their responses to the Q&A materials, and to examples of the eatwell.gov and food.gov websites, provided clear guidance on content, tone, style and presentation, as discussed in the Detailed Findings. Ease of navigation and a layered approach were considered vital for website pages.
- As regards sources of information, the FSA was known and trusted by most respondents in the context of food and safety, although not necessarily immediately in the context of pesticides. There was also a lack of clarity about the FSA's independent status – from Government, from business –

and a need to communicate this clearly to enhance its trustworthiness as an information source.

- Respondents endorsed the decision to place information about pesticides and pesticide residues on the FSA's websites, and suggested various routes for publicity, including advertising, point-of-sale posters and leaflets – and ensuring top position in Google searches.

Overall

- Differences between the segments (Avoiders, Mainstream, Discerners) in attitudes and information requirements around pesticides and pesticide residues were not as sharply delineated as might have been expected from earlier research, although examples of each of the types were evident in our sample.
- As far as can be judged from a piece of qualitative work, Mainstream is the most prevalent grouping in the population as a whole. And, importantly, the research suggests that the 'mainstream' attitude tends to prevail over other variables. We found no evidence that ethnicity was a factor determining consumers' information needs, neither were demographic factors such as gender, age, lifestage or SEG.