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Awareness and Confidence in Canada's Pesticide Regulatory System

Executive Summary Report

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. Colledge". The signature is stylized with a large loop at the end.

Mike Colledge, President
Ipsos Public Affairs
Signed on 3.20.23

This public opinion research report presents the results of an online survey and focus groups conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs on behalf of Health Canada. The research study was conducted with n=2206 Canadians participating in the survey and n=52 participating in the focus groups, from mid-January through March 2023.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre Connaissance du système de réglementation des pesticides du Canada et confiance à l'égard de celui-ci.

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Executive Summary

Introduction and Background

The Pest Management Regulatory Agency (PMRA, or Agency) is the branch of Health Canada responsible for regulating pesticides under the authority of the Pest Control Products Act (PCPA). The Agency's primary mandate is to prevent unacceptable risks to Canadians and the environment including wildlife, from the use of these products.

The PMRA works diligently to make and implement decisions that protect the health and environment of Canadians. The Agency recognizes that an ongoing, more deliberate, and sustained effort towards proactive, open and transparent engagement with Canadians will help to increase understanding of, and confidence in, the PMRA's work. In turn, this will support compliance with the requirements of the PCPA and the broader effectiveness of the PMRA's efforts to protect the health and environment of Canadians.

Over the past six years, the PMRA has been taking steps to strengthen the protection of human health and the environment including wildlife, and to build public confidence in the PMRA's work. In 2022, the PMRA launched this third wave of a public opinion research program aimed at gauging current public opinion compared to previous research results, and, where possible and appropriate, to support key initiatives under the PMRA Transformation Agenda announced in 2021.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to measure Canadians' awareness of and confidence in Canada's pesticide regulatory system. More specifically, the research objectives are the following:

Quantitative Research

- Measure Canadians' awareness of and confidence in Canada's pesticide regulatory system;
- Assess Canadians' opinions about the openness and transparency of Canada's pesticide regulatory system as well as the timeliness of decision-making;
- Assess Canadians' knowledge and opinions about pesticides in general;
- Determine Canadians' current information-seeking behaviours related to pesticides; and
- Measure changes from the 2019 survey results, where possible.

Qualitative Research

The qualitative research was designed to provide a deeper understanding of:

- Canadians' awareness of and confidence in Canada's pesticide regulatory system;
- Reactions to an infographic on Maximum Residue Limit (MRL) and information on MRL increases for the purposes of food importation;
- Reactions to the new Public Registry webpage; and,
- Perspectives on the PMRA's efforts to broaden sources to support decision-making on pesticides.

Overview of Methodology

This research was conducted in two phases:

The **quantitative component** of the research took the form of a 20-minute online survey, with a national sample of n=2,206 Canadians aged 18 years and older, including a sample boost of n=200 individuals who identify as a member of the Indigenous Peoples of Canada. The survey was administered using Ipsos' partner Canadian Viewpoint Inc panel-based resources for data collection. The survey instrument consisted of a series of closed-end and open-end questions designed in consultation with Health Canada. An online pre-test was conducted with 10 interviews completed in the English language and 10 interviews completed in the French language. Survey fieldwork took place between January 17, 2023 and February 2, 2023. The final survey data were weighted by region, gender, and age to reflect 2021 Census data.

The **qualitative component** of this research took the form of six (6) online focus groups with members of the general population. The qualitative design was national in scope, delivered in both official languages and additional effort was made to include the voices of Indigenous Peoples. A total of 52 participants took part in the research between February 15 and March 9, 2023. Topline findings from the quantitative phase informed the qualitative discussion guide. It should be noted that the qualitative findings are intended to reveal a rich range of opinions and interpretations. Qualitative findings should not be extrapolated to the broader population, as they are not statistically projectable.

Incentive/Honoraria

For the quantitative survey, respondents were incentivized for completing the survey as part of their panel participation. The incentives used were directly proportionate to the length of the survey and in line with comparable incentives offered by other online panel sources.

For the qualitative focus groups, Ipsos provided an honorarium of \$125.00 CAD to participants to attend the focus groups in order to encourage full attendance. Participants who identified with Indigenous Peoples of Canada were offered a higher incentive of \$175.00 CAD as their incidence in the population is lower and therefore harder to recruit for research.

The Report

This report contains the findings from both the quantitative online survey and the qualitative focus group sessions.

The quantitative data were weighted to the Canadian population data by region, gender, and age. All sample surveys and polls may be subject to other sources of error, including, but not limited to coverage error and measurement error. Where figures do not sum to 100, this is due to the effects of rounding.

Focus group quotes from French participants have been translated. To see the original quote, please refer to the French report.

Summary of Key Findings

Awareness and impressions

Pesticides are a topic Canadians don't often hear about – only 21% of Canadians reported hearing /reading /seeing (a lot or something) about pesticides in the past 3 months. In the qualitative research, there were only a handful of mentions

of a lawsuit against one pesticide manufacturer, although occurring outside of Canada. However, increasingly, younger Canadians are taking notice of information and media coverage about pesticides. Compared to 2019, the proportion of Canadians aged 18-34 who recalled hearing, reading or seeing information about pesticides increased significantly from 22% to 34%. Additionally, compared to four years ago, significantly more 18-34 year-olds indicated they feel adequately informed about pesticides and pest control products (27% to 41%).

Many Canadians continue to hold negative associations with pesticides. In fact, when asked what they associate pesticides with, Canadians were almost twice as likely to point out the negatives about pesticides, such as “bad for people” and “bad for the environment” than to mention the positive aspects of pesticides such as “pest/weed control” and “protect crops”. Top-of-mind associations among qualitative participants also tended to skew negative. Compared to 2019, more Canadians associated pesticides with “harming the environment, animals and insects”.

Perceptions and personal use

The understanding that pesticides are “necessary and serve a purpose” resonated with some (53%). This moderate stance regarding the purpose of regular pesticides likely underlies respondents’ preference for homemade or natural alternatives over the use of a registered pesticide (68%) in the survey. The same trend was found among participants in qualitative focus group discussions.

Nonetheless, pesticides continue to be predominantly viewed in a negative light. Consistent with this view, the research found that many Canadians believe pesticides cannot be used safely even when instructions are followed (62%) and are not overly confident that they personally can use pesticides safely (51%), figures that are largely unchanged from 2019. The qualitative research found that much of the concerns related to the unknown long-term effects of the use of pesticides on human health first and foremost, though participants were also quick to point to the potential negative effects on the environment. That said, it is worth noting that it was evident in the qualitative discussions that beyond the generally negative connotations with pesticides, several participants had not considered the topic of the safety of pesticides in much depth – with participants tending towards a general assumption that products available for purchase have been appropriately tested and are therefore safe for use.

Concerns around pesticide safety likely discourage their use. Even though there has been an improvement in the acceptance of pesticide use in public spaces, around barns, and in imported or exported foods, these ratings remain low (between 44% for imported food and 49% for in and around barns). Only four in 10 agreed that the use of pesticides in schools and other public buildings is acceptable (42%). Unsurprisingly, when this was further discussed in the qualitative discussions, participants expressed concern about the potential effects on children and pets, along with the perceived lack of control over the situation.

Despite concerns and insecurities around the use of pesticides, more Canadians reported using pesticides frequently compared to four years ago (29% vs 26%). This was very much evident in the qualitative research where several participants noted that they turned to pesticides when a need arose; the use of insect repellent and swimming pool chemicals during the summer months was the most prevalent case. This underscores the importance of continuing to offer education on promoting safe use of pesticides.

Perceptions around the safe use of certain types of pesticides (e.g., controlling devices such as mosquito zappers and mouse traps, herbicides, insecticides, rodenticides, fungicides, and material and wood preservatives) have improved, though perceptions around rodenticides still lag behind other products. More respondents believe that personal insect

repellents can be used safely compared to animal repellents to repel nuisance wildlife. In fact, the agreement that animal repellents can be used safely has been decreasing since 2016.

The survey found that Canadians are increasingly leaning toward the idea of natural alternatives. Significantly more younger Canadians 18-34 (60% from 53% in 2019) as well as those 35-54 reported that in their view there are natural alternatives to pesticides that are as effective as conventional pesticides (59% from 52% in 2019). This was reflected in the qualitative research, with many participants expressing a preference for natural alternatives or organic produce, when possible.

Knowledge and information sources

Canadians are slowly becoming more knowledgeable about pesticides, although there is still a way to go. Only 20% of Canadians reported feeling particularly knowledgeable about pesticides in general, and only four in 10 reported feeling adequately informed about pesticides and pest control. In fact, they noted that they are searching for information about pesticides from a variety of sources more than before and are increasingly turning to Internet sources (47%).

Internet search pattern shows that Canadians may not be quite sure where to look for information about pesticides as they predominantly searched on Google (70%) about the topic. The increasing penetration of YouTube and blogs, although not in the top choices as a source of pesticide information, has almost doubled since 2019, also contributes to the perception that Canadians are exploring various sources of information. In the qualitative research, participants also highlighted the importance of including relevant information on product labels themselves to allow them to make informed choices and take necessary steps to safeguard themselves.

Health Canada and Government of Canada websites appeared on a second tier of search tools being used to search about pesticides. Yet after increased popularity from 2016 to 2019, usage of these websites has grown in 2023 (30% and 24% respectively). Nevertheless, when asked, Canadians demonstrated a willingness to seek information on the Government of Canada and Health Canada websites, as many (64% and 72% respectively) say that given the option, they would likely turn to these websites for information about pesticides.

Safety and pesticide potential harms were the main points of information that Canadians would look for when searching about pesticides. The most popular topics for online searches about pesticides would include health, food safety, safe use of pesticides and environmental impacts. In the qualitative research, participants highlighted the importance of including relevant information on product labels to allow them to make informed choices and take necessary steps to safeguard themselves.

When it comes to assessing the risks of pesticides, Canadians would primarily look to health specialists, and understandably farmers, as a group most associated with pesticide use which likely confers a level of expertise. Health Canada scientists, medical doctors and the Canadian Cancer Society are considered the most believable sources (by over two-thirds of Canadians), followed closely by the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons, university professors and farmers (by about six in 10 Canadians).

Understanding of the Regulatory System

Awareness that Health Canada has a role to play in assessing the safety of pesticides has increased significantly over the past four years. Almost four in 10 (38%) Canadians indicated being aware that Health Canada is responsible for assessing pesticides for safety (up 8 points from 30% in 2019).

The improvement of awareness of Health Canada's role in the regulation of pesticides presents an opportunity to address some of the population's concerns around pesticide safety since health concerns and harm to humans are one of the top negative associations Canadians make with pesticides. The qualitative research found that Health Canada is well placed to undertake this task; many focus group participants identified Health Canada as the organization they would trust to regulate the use of pesticides because of the department's focus on population health. The expectation was for Health Canada to consult widely in their decision-making process and include the expertise of environmental protection agencies and the agricultural sector.

Many Canadians continue to believe that provincial and municipal governments have some responsibility for regulating pesticides, and although this is correct, provinces and municipalities are not responsible for assessing and regulating pesticides before they can be sold or used in Canada. Provinces and municipalities may restrict the use of certain registered pesticides on public and private property, however they may not take any actions that are less protective of health and the environment than those determined by Health Canada. While two-thirds of Canadians (65%) correctly attributed pesticide regulatory responsibilities to the federal government, a considerable proportion indicated the responsibility sits at the provincial level (36%, up 2 percentage points) or municipal level (22%, up 5 percentage points).

Confidence in Health Canada (PMRA) to Regulate Pesticides

The public opinion that Health Canada effectively regulates the use of pesticides has increased over the past four years, particularly among younger Canadians. Confidence in Health Canada to keep food and drinking water safe from pesticide residues has increased significantly (up 7 percentage points from 2019) and six in ten Canadians indicated being confident Health Canada has adequate processes in place to protect the public, up significantly from 53%. More Canadians than before also now agree that Health Canada keeps pace with modern science in its pesticide decisions (60% vs 52% in 2019).

Interestingly, the public's confidence has increased despite the fact that most do not know if the PMRA conducts its own research to test products to verify their effectiveness in controlling pests, or even if products are contaminated. Most commonly, the public believes the PMRA reviews product ingredient data to ensure they are as stated, that products have adequate warnings of the risks and ensures that products and how they are manufactured meet health and environmental standards. This indicates there is still work to be done to improve the public's awareness and understanding of the types of tasks the PMRA undertakes to regulate the availability and safe use of pesticides. The qualitative research found that information about the PMRA's work had a mixed impact: on the one hand, it was comforting to know of the existence of the Agency, yet participants were alarmed to learn about the fifteen-year cycle for re-evaluation of products. The general preference was for more regular monitoring.

Young people are increasingly interested in public consultations on this topic and awareness that Health Canada consults with the public on regulatory decisions regarding pesticides nearly doubled from 12% to 22% over the past four years. The largest increase came from younger Canadians aged 18-34, of whom 34% reported being aware. While this is a large improvement, there is more to be done to increase the public's level of interest in the decision-making process. Those who have participated have found the process to be easy and clear; so hopefully, the PMRA will be able to bring more

Canadians into the process. Making it clear that an understanding of the scientific aspects of pesticides is not critical to participate would be a useful next step.

Compared with other survey participants, those who self-identify as Indigenous Canadians expressed less confidence in Health Canada to do a good job protecting human health from the risks of pesticides (59% vs. 67%) as well as protecting the environment (soil, water, air, wildlife, domestic animals (56% vs 62%). Indigenous Canadians who participated in the survey are interested in learning more about both human health and environmental impacts of pesticides equally (68% and 67% respectively), whereas those who don't identify as Indigenous Canadians tend to be more interested in human health impacts (64% compared to 55% for environmental impacts).

Transformation Agenda

The qualitative component of this research examined the perspectives of participants on various transparency initiatives and objectives associated with the Transformation Agenda.

The research found that opportunities lie in improving the usability of the updated Public Registry website. While there was an appreciation of the comprehensiveness of the Registry, participants struggled with the functionality of the website and opportunities were found in simplifying the language used throughout and the structure of the search tools.

The use of an infographic to present information on Maximum Residue Limits (MRLs) was well-received; but, the research found challenges in participants' understanding of the bar graphic used to explain how MRLs are determined.

Participants generally welcomed the newly established Science Advisory Committee on Pest Control Products, with the role of providing independent scientific advice and recommendations to support pesticide-related decision-making. The Committee was seen to align with the broader call for Health Canada to consult widely and draw on the latest scientific evidence.

Finally, participants reacted positively to information about the expansion of the use of real-world data in the regulatory decision-making process. Caution should be exercised when communicating this as a new process as there was an expectation for this to be happening already.