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Health Canada Awareness and Confidence in Canada's Pesticide Regulatory System

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Mike Colledge
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Executive Summary

Introduction and Background

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

In 2016, the PMRA published a Strategic Plan for the agency which included a new vision statement: Canadians are confident that Canada's pesticide regulatory system protects their health and the environment. Related to this vision, the Strategic Plan features two Strategic Outcomes tied to the views and opinions of Canadians: i) PMRA makes evidence-based regulatory decisions and policies that are protective of human health and the environment, in a timely, open and transparent manner, and ii) Canadians recognize that PMRA makes pesticide regulatory decisions that protect their health and the environment. To support the Strategic Plan, by ensuring the Strategic Outcomes are achieved and the new vision is realized, a Communications and Outreach Strategy has been developed.

While PMRA works diligently to make and implement decisions that protect the health and environment of Canadians, efforts to communicate and engage with Canadians have not kept pace. A more deliberate, proactive, open and transparent engagement of Canadians will help to increase understanding of, and confidence in, PMRA's work. In turn, this will support compliance with the requirements of the PCPA and the broader effectiveness of PMRA's efforts to protect the health and environment of Canadians.

To support the development of approaches for communications and engagement that are evidence-based and supported by meaningful data - so that resources are directed toward activities that deliver real value to Canadians – quantitative and qualitative research was conducted among a sample of the Canadian general public.

Research Objectives

In 2016, Ipsos conducted research on behalf of PMRA to establish the baseline awareness and opinions of Canadians about the pesticide regulatory system in Canada and assess the key messages and techniques as part of the 5-year Communications and Outreach Strategy.

As a follow-up to the 2016 research, this research was conducted to measure changes over time and develop a further understanding of Canadians' awareness and confidence in Canada's pesticide regulatory system. Specific objectives for each phase of research included:

Quantitative research

- To measure Canadians' awareness and confidence in Canada's pesticide regulatory system;
- To assess Canadians' opinions about the openness and transparency of Canada's pesticide regulatory system, as well as the timeliness of decision-making;
- To assess Canadians knowledge and opinions about pesticides in general; and,
- To determine current Canadians' information seeking behaviours related to pesticides.

Qualitative research

- To seek a better understanding of Canadians awareness and confidence in Canada's pesticide regulatory system;
- To gather information on how best to inform Canadians on pesticides (e.g. social media, advertising, news media, agency spokesperson, industry scientist, etc.), which types of pesticides information are of interest to Canadians; and,
- To evaluate pesticides messages and taglines to determine if they are clear, credible, relevant and whether they resonate with Canadians.

The research is intended to inform the development of approaches for communications and engagement that are evidence-based and supported by meaningful data so that resources are directed toward activities that deliver real value to Canadians. The research will also assist with developing indicators which can help assess the impacts of these activities.

The outcome of the research will provide direction on how to develop a more effective communications and outreach strategy regarding pesticide regulatory decisions as a part of ongoing communications and public outreach work. Ultimately, research findings will be used to help improve the nature of communications and engagement with Canadians about pesticides so that they can make more informed decisions about pesticide use which will prevent incidents of misuse and help protect their health and environment.

This report details the results of this research, conducted in two parts (quantitative and qualitative), between February 2020 and March 2020. The total contract value of this research was \$99,754.37 including HST.

The key audience for this study include members of the Canadian general public, aged 18 or older.

Overview of Methodology

This research was conducted in two phases:

- The **quantitative component of the research** took the form of a 15-minute online survey, with a nationwide sample of n=2,029 Canadians aged 18 years and older. The survey was administered using Ipsos' panel-based resources for data collection (iSay panel). The survey instrument consisted of a series of closed-end and open-end questions designed in consultation with the Health Canada Project Authority. An online pre-test was conducted with 10 English language completes and 10 French language completes. Survey fieldwork took place between February 10th, 2020 and February 19th, 2020. The final survey data were weighted to 2016 Census data for region, gender, and age.
- The **qualitative component of the research** took the form of six, 90 minute focus groups conducted with a total of 48 general public participants. Focus group participants were selected according to the Standards for the Conduct of Government of Canada Public Opinion Qualitative Research. Two English language focus groups were conducted in Toronto on February 25th, 2020, two French language groups were conducted in Montreal on February 26th, 2020 and a further two English language groups were conducted in Calgary on February 27th, 2020. 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. Contrarily to the 2016 sounding where qualitative research was intended to further inform quantitative findings, 2020 qualitative and quantitative phases of the research were carried out concurrently.

Incentives/honoraria

For the quantitative survey, the Ipsos i-Say panel provided a number of innovative incentive programs to participants tailored to the specific requirements of each survey, depending on the length of the survey, the subject matter of the study, and the time required to complete a minimum number of interviews. A point-based system is used where participants can redeem points for various items.

For the qualitative focus groups, Ipsos provided an honorarium of \$85.00 CDN to participants to attend the focus groups in order to encourage full attendance.

This Report

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

The 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.

▲▼ Symbols have been used to indicate statistically significant results compared to 2016, wherever applicable.

Key Findings

Quantitative research

Overall awareness of pesticides and the pesticide regulatory process continues to be low. Notably however, higher levels of recall about pesticides are seen among those aged 18 to 34, those who are aware that Health Canada assesses pesticide safety, and those who are *not* confident that Health Canada's PMRA protects health and the environment. Potentially negative associations may be contributing to more recall.

Even amidst low awareness levels, respondents continue to associate pesticides with negative connotations. Survey results show that women, those who report lower levels of knowledge about the pesticides regulatory system and those who do not use pesticides, are more likely to associate them with negative thoughts.

Despite any prevailing health and safety concerns or negative associations, more respondents agree than disagree that pesticides are necessary and serve a purpose, and men are more likely to agree than women. The groups that are more likely to agree on the necessity of pesticides also include those who are knowledgeable about the pesticides regulatory process in Canada, and those who are aware that Health Canada assesses the safety of pesticides before deciding whether they can be registered in Canada, and are confident that the PMRA is doing its job.

A very small minority indicated that they are at least somewhat knowledgeable about the pesticide regulatory process in Canada. Even fewer indicated they had a high level of understanding about how pesticides regulatory decisions are made.

While an increasing majority compared to 2016 believe that the Federal Government has responsibilities for regulating pesticides in Canada, most think it is the department of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada that is responsible for this. At the same time, the identification of Health Canada is also high and has increased since 2016.

Despite low levels of knowledge about the pesticide regulatory process itself, Canadians exhibit increased confidence that Health Canada's PMRA protects the health and the environment, and trust in decision making has also improved since 2016.

The extent of acceptability of pesticides continues to be determined by factors such as personal or industrial use (such as when used by a consumer around the home, compared to industrial or agricultural use) as well as scale or extent of use (private use at home, compared to publicly i.e. in the commercial forestry sector or public green spaces).

In fact, while acceptability is still high, it has declined compared to 2016 for use in residential areas or in and around barns where agricultural animals are housed. Respondents continued to be most cautious about the use of pesticides on food imported into Canada and on fruits and vegetables, and their products, sold in Canada or exported. Groups with higher knowledge of the regulatory system, who frequently use pesticides, are aware of Health Canada's assessment of pesticide safety, or have confidence in the PMRA to protect health and the environment display higher ratings of acceptability.

Though a slightly higher proportion of Canadians in 2020 have sought information on pesticides than in 2016, the information seeking behaviour is largely consistent. Those seeking information about pesticides on the Internet primarily turn to Google or a pesticide product website as sources, and a majority would consider consulting the Health Canada website if they were looking for information about pesticides. This indicates that while those seeking information may not currently think about visiting the Health Canada website, that they are open to receiving information from the department. Health Canada scientists are the most trusted source of information on pesticides, an increase since 2016.

In the 2020 survey, additional demographic and identity information was collected. 13% of respondents identified as being an Immigrant and/or born outside of Canada, 7% identified as having a disability, 7% as LGBTQ2S+, 6% as a member of an ethnocultural or a visible minority group (not including Indigenous) and 4% as Indigenous. Additionally, out of all those surveyed, 1% of respondents indicated they live on a reserve.

Qualitative research

As was the case in 2016, most focus group participants - in all three locations - associate pesticides with three broad areas of concern, namely:

- ✓ **Health Related Concerns:** Participants often referenced health related side effects, concerns related to effects of short term and long-term exposure - cancer and mesothelioma specifically, and toxicity levels.
- ✓ **Environmental Concerns:** Unintended impact on flora and fauna due to run off, broader impacts on the environment, non-targeted species, ecosystems, waterways and some references to potential negative effects on reproductive rates in some species (i.e. Bees).
- ✓ **Concerns related to usage:** Usage in agricultural settings as it relates to crops and food production, as well as domestic uses (weed control, insect repellents, cosmetic usage for home applications.)

Most participants realize that pesticides and pesticide usage, particularly in the context of commercial or agricultural applications, are a necessity of doing business in order to ensure Canadian crops and produce are of good quality and can be exported to foreign markets. Most feel it is possible to 'manage' unintended side effects of pesticide usage by following prescribed application rates and usage guidelines.

Most agree that there is a role for government/academia, farmers, environmental protection agencies and the public when it comes to decisions related to pesticides to be used in Canada. Few see a role for pesticide industry representatives here as participants are of the view that if there are commercial interests involved money/profits would supersede all other considerations.

Very few participants take the time necessary to research more detailed pesticide related information, whether online or via any other source, such as by government or otherwise. Despite this, most felt that if the intent was indeed to effectively disseminate this type of information, verified or trusted web enabled channels (such as Health Canada's site or other government sites) would likely be preferred.

Reactions to all materials presented are more positive than negative. Of the three videos presented, 'What do Health Canada scientists do' is less well received than 'Is there a risk to the environment' and 'Is there a risk to health'. This was particularly true for sessions in Toronto and Calgary.

Despite some concerns related to script in 'What do Health Canada Scientists do' specifically, and some reservations about various elements in all three videos, overall messaging in all three video treatments appeared to be effective, Participants felt that Health Canada is focused on pesticide usage in Canada and is taking steps to ensure pesticides are used safely and in an environmentally responsible way.