

# Double standard Double risk

Banned pesticides  
in Europe's food supply

September 2024

Summary



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Hazardous pesticides banned in Europe are currently produced by European companies and exported to third countries, where safety regulations are generally weaker. The use of these toxic pesticides has devastating impacts on both human health and the environment, leading to widespread human rights violations.

This report highlights the alarming fact that these dangerous pesticides find their way back to Europe as residues in food. They are found in randomly collected samples from Member States' national monitoring programmes not expected to be of any risk. Alarming, the report also demonstrates that some of these pesticides continue to be used within Europe despite their ban.

Pesticides such as the mutagenic carbendazim or toxic to reproduction linuron and propiconazole, or bee-killing neurotoxic insecticides like thiamethoxam, clothianidin and imidacloprid, continue to be detected in plant-based food sold across Europe. These are often found in 'pesticide cocktail' mixtures. In some cases, they even exceed the established legal residue limits for individual pesticides. We also show that Maximum Residue Limits for banned pesticides are not automatically lowered to the legally defined minimum (limit of determination 0.01 mg/kg or lower). Instead, higher allowed residue limits are regularly kept in place to please international trade partners, putting European citizens' health at risk.

The export of banned and hazardous pesticides endangers the health of people and the environment in third countries. It also places EU farmers at a competitive disadvantage. Consumers unknowingly face exposure to dangerous chemicals that should have no place in their diets. This report seeks to shed light on the EU's unethical double standards regarding banned and hazardous pesticides and calls on policymakers to take decisive action to end this practice.

## Overview

PAN Europe analysed the data collected by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) on pesticide residues in food, from the official control programmes of EU Member States. We focused on randomly collected, conventionally grown plant-based 'low-risk' samples and screened them for residues of pesticides banned or severely restricted in the EU. These are listed in the Prior Informed Consent (PIC) Regulation, which governs the trade of certain hazardous chemicals that are banned or severely restricted in the EU (referred to as 'PIC pesticides'). In 2022, out of the 197 pesticides on the PIC list, **69 banned and hazardous pesticides were detected in European food.**

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## Product categories of concern:

Zooming into the product categories we find that certain products contain EU banned pesticides more often than others: **tea (38.3%), coffee (22.7%), spices (12.5%) and legumes (11.4%). Overall, imported food is twice as likely to contain EU-banned pesticides compared to food grown within the EU.** This might not be surprising, but spices, legumes and cereals grown outside the EU were **4 to 16 times** more likely to be contaminated with banned pesticides than those grown within the EU.

## What about fruit and vegetables?

European-grown fruit with the highest contamination rates included currants (13.2%), bananas (13.2%), grapefruit (8.8%), and blueberries (8.8%). For imported food, grapefruit (30.2%), mandarins (26.3%), limes (23.9%) and oranges (13.4%) showed higher contamination rates. Worryingly, 7% of EU-grown banana samples exceeded legal MRLs. Imported exotic fruits like dragon fruit and passion fruit also exceeded legal limits (5.9%), with many samples containing multiple residues. Vegetables showed lower contamination rates with PIC-banned pesticides. Very popular products like potatoes, cucumbers, lettuces and tomatoes grown in the EU showed a contamination between 4.3% (tomatoes) and 6.6% (potatoes). Imported products like peas, beans and cucumbers showed higher contamination rates ranging between 12.5% (cucumbers) and 20% (peas).

## Where does the contaminated food come from?

Looking at the exporting countries with highest rates of samples with EU banned pesticides, on the top five we have India (23.6%), Uganda (17.7%), China (16.8%), Kenya (16.5%) and Brazil (16%). Concerning EU-grown food, highest rates of banned pesticides were found in food samples from Portugal (12.7%), Malta (8.8%), Poland (7.7%), Cyprus (6.5%) and Austria (5.5%).

## The situation is not improving.

Between 2011 and 2022, the rate of samples with EU-banned pesticides went up 10 times (10x) for coffee and three times (3x) for spices.

## Top offenders?

The most frequently detected included the mutagenic and toxic to reproduction fungicide **carbendazim**, the toxic to reproduction pesticides linuron (herbicide) and **propiconazole** (fungicide), and the suspected carcinogen **chlorpropham** (herbicide). Several samples had residues of the bee-killing neurotoxic neonicotinoid insecticides clothianidin, thiamethoxam and imidacloprid. Among the 69 PIC pesticides we detected, 53 even exceeded the legal limits (MRLs) in at least one sample.

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## Effects of France's export ban.

In 2018, France adopted a law to stop the export of EU-banned pesticides, but the Regulation entered into force only in 2022. However, the findings show that in 2022, 2.5% of 'low-risk' food samples in France still contained banned pesticides. Spices (11.8%) and legumes (11.1%) were on the top of the list. Specific samples with highest rates of EU-banned pesticides were Tahiti limes (16.4%), passionfruit (10%), rice (14%) and courgettes (8%). The countries exporting the highest percentage of samples with banned pesticides to France were Vietnam (24%), Brazil (17%), Chile (10%), Egypt (10%), Colombia (9%) as well as Morocco (6%). Alarmingly, apart from mutagenic carbendazim, highly toxic and persistent organochlorine pesticides aldrin and dieldrin were detected in food produced in French territories (courgettes, cucumbers, butternut squash).

## Loopholes and breaching the law:

Contrary to public belief, banned pesticides are still permitted in EU food production, either through loopholes or trade agreements. Our study found that currently the **EU permits residues of at least 60 EU banned pesticides** in certain food products, mostly to please international trade partners. Moreover, we found that ahead of the sampling, five of these pesticides had been authorised to be used in specific EU countries under 'emergency situation', a derogation that must not be used for hazardous EU-banned pesticides according to the European Court of Justice.

Considering the pesticides that were detected in at least 30 samples (of EU or non-EU origin), we have a list of 16 pesticides. Only for 7 out of these 16 pesticides, the MRLs have been lowered to the legal minimum (the limit of determination). For the rest, the EU gives its consent to import food that contains residues of dangerous toxic pesticides.

**Urgent call for policy measures:** The EU has committed to stop the production and export of pesticides banned within Europe due to their high toxicity, but these measures have yet to be presented and implemented. Member States continue to receive unlawful derogations to use banned pesticides in their crop in pure oversight of the EU law and case law. In the meantime, the European Commission and Member States permit residues of such dangerous pesticides in imported food. Members of the European Parliament have repeatedly objected to this and call for zero tolerance of such residues in EU food.

**In the face of a global crisis driven by chemical pollution and biodiversity loss, we urge EU policymakers to demonstrate leadership by ending these unethical double standards.** Pesticides deemed too toxic for use here are too toxic for use everywhere. Protecting public health and biodiversity, both within and beyond Europe, must take precedence over trade and industry profits.

You can find the report [here](#)