

PRESS RELEASE

CSE welcomes independent testing. ‘Independence’ and ‘credibility’ matter. ‘Accreditation’ is not an issue

New Delhi, August 8, 2003: The Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) welcomes the Union government’s initiative to have soft drinks sold by the two cola giants independently tested for pesticide residues. CSE advises the government to broaden the ambit: testing must be done also for residues of cadmium, arsenic and lead, since the standard for these hazardous substances is much higher – 50 times – than what is legislated for the bottled water industry. At the same time, CSE would like to caution the government: these tests should be done extremely carefully to ensure complete independence and credibility of results. After all, these are powerful companies.

We caution from experience. CSE is witness to industry pressurising government to whitewash the truth. When controversy erupted over the use of pesticide endosulfan in Padre village in Kerala in 2001, CSE tested samples and confirmed the presence of very high levels of the pesticide in the food and water of the village. As a result, the Kerala Plantation Corporation commissioned an independent report from an accredited agency -- which gave a clean chit to industry and said that there was no endosulfan present in the village! It took 10 months of consistent efforts by activists to reopen the case and finally, it was the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), which asked the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) to revisit the village.

The ICMR study that followed was an eye-opener. It not only confirmed endosulfan levels CSE had reported, but also pointed to the high levels of reproductive, congenital and neurological diseases the village was suffering from, because of this deadly pesticide.

Therefore, given the very high stakes involved, it is imperative that the testing is carefully done so that the results are completely credible.

CSE completely dissociates itself from the kind of action being resorted to by certain groups across the country who are smashing and burning bottles

of Coke and Pepsi and even calling for a ban. We have consistently maintained: it is *not Coke per se and Pepsi per se* that are to blame. It is the lack of government regulations. Therefore, instead of breaking cold drink bottles, it is important for the same activists to instead point accusing fingers at the weak regulatory framework for the soft drink industry. While the bottled water industry has now been brought under better regulation, no equivalently stringent norms exist for this extremely powerful and important food industry. It is the lack of norms and the weakness of the regulatory framework that need to be repaired.

We do not accept Coke's contention that it meets global standards. Firstly, it is not true -- as CSE's earlier report on bottled water clearly showed -- Coke and Pepsi were also indicted in the bottled water case, when their products Aquafina and Kinley were found to contain pesticide residues higher than EEC norms. It was very clear that the companies were meeting the extremely weak norms of the Government of India, and not global norms. Similarly, in this case, it is apparent that these companies are meeting only the virtually non-existent government norms, and not global ones, as the lack of data of their product presented by companies clearly reveals.

Finally, a larger issue. Coke and Pepsi are not extra-constitutional authorities in this country. They cannot determine the regulations they will follow. The people of India must demand adequate regulations, which guarantees their safety. CSE, therefore, hope that this debate will now move the government to enact tight regulations for this industry -- however powerful -- as fast as possible.