

Agent Orange rumour shows depth of misinformation

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By Barb Glen

Rumours still persist that a powerful defoliant used in the Vietnam War is still used today and can found on food

The postings appear periodically on social media, placed by people critical of chemical manufacturers or who promote organic food or reduced chemical use in food crops.

The postings are about Agent Orange, and they suggest that the powerful Vietnam War-era defoliant is being used today and can be found in food.

Not true, says Joe Schwarcz, director for the Office of Science and Society at McGill University. Such postings are examples of the misleading information facing today's consumers and are among the reasons many are confused and worried about food production and safety.

He mentioned the rumoured "Agent Orange corn" Dec. 6 when speaking at the Farming Smarter conference.

Agent Orange itself is a combination of the herbicide 2,4-D, a commonly used herbicide, and 2,4,5-T, an acid. When mixed, they produce a dioxin that was later found to be dangerous to human health.

However, Agent Orange has not been manufactured since the 1960s, said Schwarcz, and there is no way to synthesize 2,4-D so that it results in the dangerous dioxin.

**THE SAME
PEOPLE WHO SPRAYED
AGENT ORANGE
= ON VIETNAM =
ARE SPRAYING
YOUR PRODUCE**

MARCH
LOADING
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Postings about Agent Orange suggesting that the powerful Vietnam War-era defoliant is being used today and can be found in food are not true, says Joe Schwarcz, director for the Office of Science and Society at McGill University. Such postings are examples of the misleading information facing today's consumers and are among the reasons many are confused and worried about food production and safety. | Screenshot via www.covvha.net

“This is chemical folly,” he said about rumours to the contrary.

Schwarcz is well known on the speaking circuit for his attempts to better explain science, chemistry and food safety. He has written several books with that goal, the most recent of which is *Monkeys, Myths and Molecules*.

“We try to cast light into the dark shadows in the world of pseudo science,” he said about his work.

Fears about herbicide, pesticide and fungicide use on food crops are among the main issues he addressed at the conference, given the preponderance of farmers in attendance.

“Chemicals are not to be feared. Of course they are not to be worshipped either. They’re not good or bad. They don’t make any decisions. What we need to do is understand them. We need to understand that we live in a world that is constructed of chemicals, a large number of them.

“The presence of a chemical is not the same as the presence of risk.”

Humans secrete 3,079 compounds in their bodies, making them “nothing more than one large bag of chemicals,” said Schwarcz.

It’s also true that apples naturally contain acetone, formaldehyde and propanol, among many other chemicals, and these are naturally occurring and have always been part of the apple makeup.

“Only the dose makes the poison,” he said, quoting an ancient adage.

As for fear of pesticides, it is understandable, but context is essential.

“Any discussion of pesticides has to of course make clear that these are potentially dangerous substances. That’s why they are used. A chemical is not good or bad. It’s all a question of how it is used.”

When it comes to food production, Schwarcz said the controversy between organic and conventional methods is unnecessary.

Death does not lurk in the grocery aisle, he said. Concern tends to be elevated because of so much available and conflicting information. As well, there is now the ability to find even the tiniest traces of chemicals in food, and even if those traces are safe, it raises questions.