

consumer mailbag

The following is one of the Consumer Mailbag's ECO-NOTES — updates on various environmental issues.

AIR QUALITY
During 1987, air quality remained poor in all major U.S. cities despite the continued battle to reduce pollution levels down to comply with the federal set standards. The EPA reports that 69 metropolitan areas — six more than in 1986 — failed to meet the ozone standards. Ozone is the main lung-irritating ingredient in smog.

Several areas showed improvement in carbon monoxide levels, mainly because more older cars exempt from emission controls were junked. Despite improvements, 59 areas failed to meet the carbon

monoxide levels. The 23 largest U.S. urban areas failed on one or both counts.

ACID RAIN
While most people are aware that Northeast inland lakes are being adversely affected by acid deposits, a recent report from the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) states that acid rain — specifically airborne nitrogen — is causing a major decline in the quality of coastal waters and marine life in the eastern United States.

The EDF study examined the effects of eutrophication (the depletion of oxygen from the water) rather than acidity, on coastal life.

Airborne nitrogen oxides, mostly from cars and electric utilities, are converted to nitric acids and ni-

trates. When deposited in the water, the chemicals stimulate excessive algae growth. The algae depletes the oxygen supply and blocks sunlight needed by marine plants and animals.

According to the U.S. EPA, cases of severe oxygen depletion and fish kills are on the rise in eastern coastal waters from the Chesapeake Bay south through North Carolina, particularly in estuaries.

SOLAR ENERGY
A main drawback to solar energy has been its higher cost in relation to other forms of energy. However, solar energy researchers are getting closer to making solar energy cost competitive with coal and oil.

Scientists at the Arco Solar Co. and the Solar Energy Research Insti-



Terry Gibb

tute, a division of the U.S. Department of Energy, have increased solar panel efficiency from 8 percent to 11.2 percent. Fifteen percent efficiency would make the panels cost-competitive with other energy sources.

This efficiency improvement was achieved with the use of copper indium diselenide (CIS), a semiconductor material that converts sunlight into electricity.

CIS produces large amounts of electrical current in panels, but at the same time lowers the panel's maximum voltage. When the voltage was raised, the current was reduced to unacceptable levels.

Scientists found by adding the element gallium to CIS they could raise the voltage without getting the usual reduction in current.

The Solar Energy Research Institute believes that these CIS/gallium panels should one day produce power at half the cost of power generated by present day solar panels and cost competitive with coal or oil.

Arco hopes to market these new panels for limited commercial use by 1990.

NEXT WEEK: pesticides in produce.

The Consumer Mailbag answers your questions. Address mail to The Consumer Mailbag, Concern Detroit, One Kennedy Square, 4th Floor, Detroit 48226.

Are the pesticides we eat dangerous?

Q. Are pesticides dangerous in the amounts that we consume in food?

A. If pesticides didn't contain poison, they wouldn't kill pests. And there wouldn't be the current concerns about what type and how much is in our foods.

The FDA says NO, the amounts consumed by the average American are not dangerous. The National Academy of Sciences says MAYBE. Consumer groups say YES.

However, while the "experts" argue, we as consumers don't have to be helplessness bystanders. We can make a difference in how we select and prepare these foods.

The following questions and an-

swers from the Nutrition Action Healthletter should unravel some of the conflicting information we've heard:

HOW SERIOUS IS THE PROBLEM OF PESTICIDES IN FOODS?
In an EPA ranking of 29 environmental problems, it concluded that only worker exposure to chemicals and indoor radon pose a greater risk of cancer than pesticides in food. However, while the "experts" argue, we as consumers don't have to be helplessness bystanders. We can make a difference in how we select and prepare these foods.

While other risks factors, such as diet, smoking or drinking, play a

more important role than pesticides in the general public's health, we are aware of these risks and have some control over them. Because pesticides can't be seen or tasted, they go largely unnoticed.

ARE SOME PEOPLE MORE AT RISK THAN OTHERS?

Farm workers who mix and apply toxic pesticides are in the greatest danger. Children who consume more pesticides per pound of body weight than any other group are the next most vulnerable.

WHICH FOODS ARE MOST LIKELY TO CONTAIN PESTICIDE

RESIDUES?

Meat, poultry, fish, butter and lard probably contain residue more frequently than fruits or vegetables. We consume the greatest TOTAL amount of pesticides from grains and added fat because we eat so much of these in our diet.

WHICH FOODS ARE "CLEANEST?"

Legumes — beans and peas — usually have the lowest levels when tested.

Also, refined sugar and refined vegetable oils are virtually residue-free because the residue is eliminated during the extensive processing used in the refining process.

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