

OCT 12 1983

Common Sense in Chemicals

NEW battles are shaping up over the risk-benefit relationships of chemicals used in the production and processing of food.

A key issue is the famous Delaney clause in food-safety laws that requires any chemical to be banned if it is even suspected of causing cancer in human beings or animals. It need not be proved.

It is estimated that insects, diseases and weeds destroy 30 percent of potential production before harvest and another 4 to 9 percent after harvest, in spite of chemical controls.

Scores of useful agricultural chemicals have been banned on suspicion, often on the basis of limited or questionable laboratory research. Certain tests have been ridiculed by industry spokesmen because of the huge doses given to small animals. When scaled to human size it was found that to risk similar ill effects a person would have to ingest hundreds of bottles of soft drinks daily or consume hundreds of pounds of liver from cattle given antibiotics.

One of the most controversial chemicals banned was DDT, which has saved the lives of millions threatened with malaria. No satisfactory substitute has been found, and farmers have had to use larger amounts of less-effective materials at greater cost.

In 1979, the congressional Office of Technology Assessment concluded that without pesticides or equally effective alternative measures grain prices would jump 60 percent and commercial producers of lettuce, apples, potatoes and strawberries would suffer "intolerable loss-

es." No doubt, product quality would deteriorate, too.

A new study by HOPES Consulting Inc., commissioned by the National Association of Wheat Growers, showed that wheat growers who routinely use pesticides on their farms have not suffered higher rates of miscarriages, stillbirths or birth defects than their siblings who have not been exposed to pesticides.

Legislation has been introduced in Congress repeatedly to pump common sense into the zero tolerance law, but critics have headed off passage. A Senate bill was stalled a year ago when opponents insisted that it authorize "private right of action" lawsuits against chemical users — perhaps on the basis of suspicion.

It is now reported that the Food & Drug Administration is moving toward adoption of a policy that would allow for careful risk assessment rather than bans on chemicals and drugs that might pose minor health hazards in the food supply.

This seems to be a reasonable approach. After all, many so-called "natural foods" are veritable chemical factories. The good old potato contains arsenic among its 150 chemical ingredients, an onion contains propyl mercaptan, and other vegetables naturally include hydrocarbons, ketones, esters, acids and lactones.

Supporters of the proposed change in safe-food laws say that without a new policy more substances will have to be banned because electronic tests will reveal their presence in tiniest amounts.