

## Shame on USDA for Supporting Big Industry Attack on Watchdog Group

By Wendy Gordon  
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I carry in my wallet a little shopping guide, put together by the [Environmental Working Group](#). It tells me which fruits and vegetables have low pesticide residues, so I can feel they're safe to eat even when they're not organic. The guide also lists the produce that tests show to have the highest pesticide residues. For these, EWG suggests buying organic only.

This guide has always struck me as a very thoughtful shopping aid for health-wise consumers who are both safety and budget-conscious. It never occurred to me that the card might be telling me, "Eat these, not those," but rather, "Buy these from this end of the display case, those from the other."

But that's what a pro-pesticide, big-agriculture group has charged. The Alliance for Food and Farming (AFF) is saying that EWG's *Shopper's Guide to Pesticides* has influenced people to eat fewer vegetables.

I'm not sure that anyone has checked to see what impact EWG's wallet card actually has had on changing consumption. But AFF's claim is fundamentally wrong, because produce sales are going up, not down. Unfortunately -- and this may be what's bothering the AFF -- the growth is in demand for organic fruits and vegetables. Conventional produce sales are flat.

Possibly the most disturbing aspect of this situation is that the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the California Department of Agriculture gave \$180,000 of taxpayer money to the AFF, specifically to support this intimidation effort. Worse, the money came from the federal Specialty Crops Block Grant, which is meant to support research, marketing, and nutrition programs that help make produce, nuts, and flower crops more competitive, more accessible, and *more sustainable*.

This isn't right. Federal tax dollars shouldn't go to support pro-big business public relations campaigns intent on undermining the country's public health, or its growing organic produce industry. If major users and vendors of agricultural chemicals want to try and convince consumers that pesticides aren't a problem, they should do it on their own dime, not ours.

There are safety risks associated with pesticide residues on produce. Making information available to consumers about these risks and the alternatives is a legitimate service provided by many non-profit groups. Consumers have a right to know what's in their food, and to make their choices accordingly.

I appreciate the watchdog groups that draw attention to these food safety issues. Thanks to environmental and health non-profits calling attention to the [risks associated with the endocrine-disrupting chemical bisphenol-A](#), and arousing consumer concern, "companies are actually moving faster than regulators in phasing out BPA from food and beverage packaging," according to a new report, ["Seeking Safer Packaging 2010."](#)

Some companies, such as Hain Celestial, H.J. Heinz, and ConAgra, appreciate the potential liabilities and are "wasting no time in transitioning out of BPA," according to the report. But laggards remain, including Coca-Cola, Del Monte, Kraft, and WalMart.

Government should reinforce the leadership these companies have shown by toughening up regulation of BPA. Likewise, government should find ways to reward growers who reduce their pesticide use, make the investment in switching to organic methods, and seek certification. The USDA should be supporting the consumer's right-to-know about how products are produced, not using tax dollars to support intimidation campaigns that may undercut better health and production practices.