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Centre junks CSE cola charges

Corporate Bureau
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The ministry of health and family welfare has rejected the findings of the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) that charged PepsiCo and Coca-Cola of selling soft drinks with higher-than-permitted levels of pesticide residues, drawing criticism from the NGO that the Centre was colluding with the cola companies.

"The conclusion of the expert committee (constituted to review the CSE report) is that the report does not provide conclusive evidence for presence of different pesticides in the concentration reported," health minister Ambumani Ramadoss told the Lok Sabha.

The committee, headed by D Kanungo, additional director general of directorate general of health services, disagreed with the CSE report on two major counts. One, it found gaps in quantitative data pertaining to

the samples used by the NGO for testing of chemicals.

Two, the committee pointed out mismatches between the kind of pesticides found by CSE and those commonly used in

FIZZ BACK IN COLAS

- Panel finds gaps have been found in quantitative data of samples used by the CSE
- It points to mismatches in the CSE findings with actual use of some of the widely-used pesticides
- Expert panel has questioned the competence of Pollution Monitoring Laboratory
- Cola cos welcome report, reiterate safety of their products

India. For instance, CSE found a high concentration of insecticide delta-HCH, a variety of hexachlorocyclohexane though its prevalence in Indian agriculture is not high—less than 7% of total HCH used.

"Variants like alpha-HCH are used in large quantities. Beta-HCH lasts much longer. That CSE has not found these iso-

mers is surprising," committee member R K Kalra, retired toxicologist of Punjab Agricultural University, told

Further,



agents used in colas or other chemicals could have shown up as "a spurious peak".

The presence of malathion — an insecticide used commonly in mosquito repellents — in soft drinks looked improbable since the chemical is very unstable in an acidic medium like colas, Kalra said. CSE's study put the total amount of pesticides in 57 soft drink samples at between 2.65 parts per billion and 31.55 ppb against the permitted 0.5 ppb level.

CSE strongly refuted the expert committee's findings and accused it of parroting Central Science Laboratory, a UK agency hired by Coca-Cola last fortnight to validate the scientific basis of the NGO's charges. "It is very unfortunate that the minister has decided to toe the company line and even use its language verbatim," CSE director Sunita Narain alleged in a statement.

Coca Cola and Pepsi have welcomed the report of the expert group.

CSE's finding that another insecticide, heptachlor, was detected in cola samples does not stand up to scrutiny, the committee reported, since the chemical is banned in India since 1996. "There have been numerous cases of mistaken identity with heptachlor; this could also be one," Kalra said. He suggested flavouring