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Health Canada Awareness and Confidence in Canada's Pesticide Regulatory System

Executive Summary
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Mike Colledge
President
Ipsos Public Affairs



Executive Summary

Introduction and Background

The Pest Management Regulatory Agency (PMRA), a branch of Health Canada, is pursuing its mandate to prevent unacceptable risks to Canadians and environment from the use of pesticides guided by a new Strategic Plan which outlines a vision in which Canadians are confident that Canada's pesticide regulatory system protects their health and the environment.

The Strategic Plan sets two Strategic Outcomes to be achieved and measured over the next 5 years and to support the opinion and view among the general public that i) PMRA makes evidence-based regulatory decisions and policies that are protective of human health and the environment, in a timely, open and transparent manner, and ii) Canadians recognize that PMRA makes pesticide regulatory decisions that protect their health and the environment. To support these initiatives, a new Communications and Outreach Strategy has been developed.

While PMRA works diligently to make and implement decisions that protect the health and environment of Canadians, efforts to communicate and engage with Canadians have not kept pace. A more deliberate, proactive, open and transparent engagement of Canadians will help to increase understanding of, and confidence in, PMRA's work. In turn, this will support compliance with the requirements of the PCPA, and the broader effectiveness of PMRA's efforts to protect the health of Canadians and the environment.

To support the development of approaches for communications and engagement that are evidence-based and supported by meaningful data - so that resources are directed toward activities that deliver real value to Canadians – quantitative and qualitative research was conducted among a sample of the Canadian general public.

Research Objectives

This research was conducted to establish a reliable baseline and understanding of Canadians awareness and confidence in Canada's pesticide regulatory system. Specific research objectives for each phase of research included:

Quantitative research

- To measure Canadians awareness and confidence in Canada's pesticide regulatory system;
- To assess Canadians opinions about the openness and transparency of Canada's pesticide regulatory system, as well as the timeliness of decision-making;
- To assess Canadians knowledge and opinions about pesticides in general; and,
- To determine current Canadians' information seeking behaviours related to pesticides.

Qualitative research

- To seek a better understanding of Canadians awareness and confidence in Canada's pesticide regulatory system;
- To gather information on how best to inform Canadians on pesticides (e.g. social media, advertising, news media, agency spokesperson, industry scientist, etc.) which types of pesticides

information are of interest to Canadians; and,

- To evaluate pesticides messages and taglines to determine if they are clear, credible, relevant and resonate with Canadians.

This research will be used to establish the baseline awareness and opinions of Canadians about the pesticide regulatory system in Canada and will allow the assessment of key messages and techniques as part of the 5-year Communications and Outreach Strategy. This research also will enable future assessments to be repeated in order to determine changes and trends in the intervening years as well as to gauge the effectiveness of communication, engagement and outreach activities.

This report details the results of this research, conducted in two parts (quantitative and qualitative), between October 2016 and November 2016. The total contract value of this research was \$74,981.10 including HST.

The key audience for this study include members of the Canadian general public, aged 18 or older.

Overview of Methodology

This research was conducted in two phases:

- The **quantitative component of the research** took the form of a 15-minute online survey with a nationwide sample of n=2,015 Canadians aged 18 years and older. The survey was administered using Ipsos' panel-based resources for data collection (iSay panel). The survey instrument consisted of a series of closed-end and open-end questions designed in consultation with the Health Canada Project Authority. An online pre-test was conducted with 10 English language completes and 10 French language completes. Survey fieldwork took place between October 6th, 2016 and October 13th, 2016. The final survey data were weighted to 2011 Census data for region, gender, and age.
- The **qualitative component of the research** took the form of four, two-hour focus groups conducted with a total of 30 general public participants. Focus group participants were selected according to the Standards for the Conduct of Government of Canada Public Opinion Qualitative Research. Two focus groups were conducted in Montreal (in French) on November 21st, 2016 and two focus groups were conducted in Toronto (in English) on November 22nd, 2016. It should be noted that the qualitative findings are not generalizable to a larger population, and that they should be considered directional only.

Incentives/honoraria

For the quantitative survey, the i-Say panel provides a number of innovative incentive programs to participants tailored to the specific requirements of each survey, depending on the length of the survey, the subject matter of the study, and the time required to complete a minimum number of interviews. A point-based system is used where participants can redeem points for various items.

For the qualitative focus groups, Ipsos provided an honorarium of \$75.00 CDN to participants to attend the focus groups in order to encourage full attendance.

This Report

This report contains the findings from both the quantitative online survey and the qualitative focus group sessions.

The data were weighted to the Canadian population data by region, gender, and age. All sample surveys and polls may be subject to other sources of error, including, but not limited to coverage error and measurement error. Where figures do not sum to 100, this is due to the effects of rounding.

Key Findings

Survey respondents and focus group participants generally associate pesticides with negative connotations though the vast majority say they haven't seen read or heard anything about them in the past three months. Survey results show that women and those who report low levels of knowledge about the pesticides regulatory system are more likely to associate them with negative thoughts. Focus group discussions highlighted a similar dynamic among participants. Young people (18 to 34) and those who use pesticide products are more likely to have heard something, as are those who are not confident that the PMRA is doing its job.

While more survey respondents agree that pesticides are necessary and serve a purpose than those who disagree, half say they are unsure. Those more likely to agree include older respondents (55 years of age and older) with higher income levels who use pesticides at least sometimes, those who consider themselves to be knowledgeable about the pesticides regulatory system in Canada, those who are aware that Health Canada regulates pesticides, and those who are confident in the job the PMRA is. Women and younger respondents (18 to 34) are more likely to disagree.

The extent of acceptability of use of pesticides was led by factors such personal control over product use (such as when used by a consumer around the home, compared to industrial or agricultural use) and scale (once again, such as private use in the home, compared to in the commercial forestry sector or public green spaces). Respondents were least comfortable with the use of pesticides on food imported into Canada and on fruits and vegetables, and their products, sold in Canada or exported. Knowledge of the regulatory system, use of pesticides (experience with products) and confidence in the PMRA to protect health and the environment drive higher ratings of acceptability. Older Canadians also tend offer higher acceptability ratings in various areas of use.

Focus groups allowed for a better understanding of survey results with regards to pesticides' usefulness and the role played by the Government of Canada. Discussions thus highlighted that most participants had limited awareness of the positive role of pesticides. They tended to focus on the negative aspects of large-scale commercial and agricultural usage, which they associated with serious health risks for humans and animals. Many believed that there were better, healthier, alternatives to what they viewed as dangerous chemicals. Women and participants in Montreal were more likely to hold this point of view.

Despite their negative outlook on pesticides and lack of awareness in general, most focus group participants felt that the Canadian government must be doing a good job at protecting them from the harmful effects of pesticides. This vague impression was driven by two main elements. One was a simple

observation: they rarely heard of issues related to pesticides and therefore, assumed that regulators must be doing something good to protect humans and animals. The second element was a more general belief that the Canadian government probably tried to do what was best for Canadians, although not all participants agreed, especially in Montreal.

Focus groups were also used to test a series of messages that may be used to communicate with Canadians regarding pesticides and pest control products use and regulations in Canada. Overall, the messaging tested in the four groups was well received. Most participants, especially in Toronto, were reassured by what they read and felt that it provided good information. Because they lacked awareness about the regulation system, participants were reassured to know that Health Canada was directly involved in ensuring that pesticides and pest control products used in Canada complied with stringent rules and regulations before they could be used.

Throughout message testing discussions, it was very clear that the mention of scientists or scientific evidence in various messages was reassuring for almost all participants. Participants did not automatically assume that scientists were involved in Health Canada's regulation and investigation efforts and wanted to be told as such because they had a higher degree of trust in scientists than in other spokespersons, whether it be the Health Minister or another person or group.

