

Pesticides in the Pantry: Do Food Manufacturers Care?

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Whether or not you are concerned about the safety and [nutritional](#) effects of pesticide use on food crops, it is hard to ignore the environmental impacts.

Buying [organic](#) foods is an important step in avoiding pesticides, but when it comes to packaged foods, organic versions are not always available. Ideally, we would like to support companies that are actively working to reduce their pesticide use. But identifying those companies has been virtually impossible.

[As You Sow](#), a nonprofit shareholder activism group, produced a report called [Pesticides in the Pantry: Transparency & Risk in Food Supply Chains](#). It encourages food manufacturers to consider the growing risks of synthetic pesticides in their agricultural supply chains. The report provides a first step to creating performance benchmarks and encouraging corporate transparency regarding pesticide use.

The Study

Pesticides in the Pantry scores 14 major U.S. food manufacturers on 30 performance indicators for supply chain pesticide use. Companies were not required to participate actively in the study; the evaluations were based on publicly available data. However, each participating company was given the opportunity to review the report and contest or supplement the information provided.

The indicators are quite basic, beginning with whether the company acknowledges that avoiding pesticide use is desirable. This standard could be met by establishing a policy that encourages suppliers to avoid or minimize pesticides — or even by any public statement that the company would attempt to reduce the use of pesticides. Not all of the corporations met this standard.

The next question was whether any part of the company had a sustainable sourcing program in place. Additional indicators considered the specific actions (if any) that make up that program, and whether the program had established any targets or goals to measure the effectiveness of its efforts. Despite the fact that even lip service to pesticide reduction and sustainability earned points, the average score was shockingly low.



Are there pesticides in your food? If it's not certified organic, it's pretty likely.

Results

Out of a possible 30 points total, two companies earned no points at all, and the highest score was only 18, with an average of 6.1. The top scoring companies — and the only two to score above 10 points — were General Mills (18) and PepsiCo (14). General Mills owns more than 100 brands, from cereal to yogurt and frozen desserts. PepsiCo is most famous for its soda, but it also sells snack foods like potato chips, Quaker Oats, and bottled water.

The two companies that earned no points at all were Post and B&G Foods. Post makes breakfast cereals, and B&G Foods owns dozens of brands, from Green Giant vegetables to Ortega Mexican foods and Grandma's Molasses. Unfortunately, the no-scorers had much closer company than the high scorers. Their neighbors, with only two points each, were ConAgra (owners of Vlasic, Orville Redenbacher's, and ReddiWip as well as Gardein veggie burgers) and J.M. Smucker (whose 40 familiar brands include not only jam but also pet foods, Folgers coffee, and Jif peanut butter).

The report found that most of the companies have some form of sustainable sourcing program in place. But those programs lack clear criteria. Only three of the 14 include reducing pesticide use as an indicator of sustainability in their sourcing programs: Del Monte, General Mills, and PepsiCo. A fourth, Lamb Weston, has a specific pesticide reduction target.

Indirect With Integrated Pest Management

Six companies approached pesticide use indirectly, through the adoption of

integrated pest management (IPM). IPM is an approach to agriculture that permits the use of pesticides while generally seeking to minimize it. Unfortunately, while IPM can be a [responsible farming method](#) in the right hands, there is no industry-wide standard for IPM. So it can be used for [greenwashing](#).

Only two of the companies that encourage IPM disclose their program definitions and guidelines. Only one, PepsiCo, requires its suppliers to participate. Even they have no mechanism to ensure compliance, and indeed, report that only about two-thirds of their suppliers globally actually participate in IPM practices.

Since this was the first iteration of the study, the intent was to establish a baseline for measuring progress over time. Unfortunately, the report's authors discovered that some companies are literally starting at zero.

What Can You Do?

So, how can consumers encourage these major food manufacturers to get off the starting line? It's natural to conclude that you should avoid the low-scoring companies. But [shopping your values](#) may not be the most effective way to influence corporate behavior.

For companies as big as those studied for *Pesticides in the Pantry*, only the largest and most focused boycotts can have any effect. It is almost impossible to identify the actual manufacturer of every product we buy. It is equally difficult to avoid a particular company when only a handful of companies control so much of the market.

However, direct communication with a brand can be surprisingly [effective](#). And corporations do listen to shareholders. You can support organizations like As You Sow that work to leverage shareholder advocacy. Or, acting as a shareholder, you can make a huge difference. You don't necessarily have to be a board member on a major multinational corporation to have a voice — sometimes even one share of [the right kind](#) of stock can earn you a vote.

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