

You didn't think the Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment (RISE) would invite a guest speaker to its annual meeting last month in New Orleans to bash pesticides, did you? That would be like the Green Bay Packers fan club inviting a speaker to its annual meeting to bash its beloved quarterback Brett Favre.

To nobody's surprise, guest speaker Debbie Edwards proved to be a cheerleader for pesticides. That said, there still had to be a sense of relief among the meeting's attendees — producers, suppliers and distributors of specialty pesticides and fertilizers — when Edwards, director of the Environmental Protection Agency's office of pesticide programs, said to them firmly and candidly, "I do believe — and it's clear — that pesticides have a real and important place in society in the United States."

With all due respect to Edwards, you just don't know what might come out of some of these bureaucrats' mouths these days, what with government people all over the board with their views on certain issues and flip-flopping as they go along.

But Edwards, who began her position in April and is responsible for the management of the pesticide programs under the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA), made it clear to her audience in the first few minutes of her speech just how important they are to Americans.

"I believe the benefits of pesticides are broad and diverse," Edwards said. "Their benefits are experienced by all U.S. citizens every day."

That said, Edwards pointed out that the mainstream media isn't keen on delivering such a beneficial message.

"Pesticides are always, always, always in the news," Edwards said. "And most of the times the stories are not favorable. Most of the articles I saw earlier this summer had to do with exposure of children to pesticides in and around schools."

Edwards knew the people in the audience knew that such unfavorable stories cause ire among environmental activists and easily

Taking on the Activists Tactfully

BY LARRY AYLWARD



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impressed consumers who view such reports as horror stories, not to mention the pesticide and fertilizer professionals who view the one-sided reports as yellow journalism.

Knowing that she had her audience's attention, Edwards then delivered the key point to her keynote address. "I want to leave you with a message on what I think is the best way to get these things resolved," she said. "But bear in mind that nothing is easy."

She didn't advise attendees to fashion their own activist agendas to go after those who oppose pesticides and fertilizers with a stand-offish "you're-out-of-touch-with-reality" message. Edwards advised them to do just the opposite. Seek them out harmoniously and offer to sit down with them to let them know where you're coming from, she urged. Then, in a setting that's more conducive for all, tell them how your products are used wisely and safely to prevent harmful occurrences.

This may be difficult to do considering many of these people are antagonistic in their own right in addition to being out of touch with reality in regard to pesticide and fertilizer use. But Edwards is right. This is the route you must take.

"When you bring people together and try to find a common goal, you can work your way through some of these issues," she said.

Edwards' advice is simple, but challenging to put into action. While it's easy to combat the activists by fighting them from afar with canned messages, it may be uncomfortable to sit down with them to discuss the issues and try to come to an understanding.

Like Edwards said, it won't be easy. But it would sure be worth the effort.

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