



SMALLHOLDER TEA PRODUCERS BENEFIT FROM HARMONIZED SAFETY STANDARDS

WORKING FOR world's smallholder tea producers

WORKING TO ensure safe production and simplify steps for participating in tea trade

WORKING WITH Codex Alimentarius Commission, FAO/WHO Joint Meeting on Pesticide Residue (JMPR)

WORKING THANKS TO funding from tea-producing countries, FAO's IGG Secretariat



Tea does not start its existence in decorated tins or tidy tea bags. It comes from the leaves of *Camellia sinensis*, which is grown in more than 50 countries but mainly found in the fields of four – China, India, Kenya and Sri Lanka. While in those fields, tea plants must battle a host of natural enemies – fungus, bacteria and insects such as butterflies, moths, scale and nematodes. To maximize output, tea growers apply an assortment of chemicals and pesticides that control the pests but have the potential of harming consumers if too much remains on the leaves as they are processed.

Historically, the tea value chain was dominated by large, government-supported tea estates, but that has changed as smallholders have become the main producers in the increasingly global tea trade. More than 70 percent of national tea production in Sri Lanka and Kenya now comes from smallholders, meaning they operate from holdings of less than three hectares.

This movement is understandable, as tea production is an attractive proposition for small farmers.

Tea began its journey towards becoming the most widely consumed beverage in the world, after water, some 5 000 years ago. According to folklore, a few tea leaves accidentally wafted into a pot of water that a Chinese emperor was boiling, giving off a rich aroma and enticing the emperor to drink it. Thus was born the tea culture that began in Asia and spread to Europe in the 1600s, with European countries then setting up enormous tea plantations in their tropical colonies. Today, it takes more than four million tonnes of tea to satisfy annual consumer demand, a number that increases every year. Most of the large tea estates have been replaced by smallholder producers, who often have difficulty complying with a host of safety standards on use of pesticides. In 2012, after a decade of concerted work, the FAO Intergovernmental Group (IGG) on Tea, a subsidiary body of the Committee on Commodity Problems (CCP), spearheaded an agreement that harmonized pesticide standards, making tea production safer for consumers and protecting the livelihoods of millions of smallholder producers worldwide.

Although the plants require two to three years to mature, they then produce for 30 years or more. Tea production also provides work and income throughout the year and requires a relatively small investment.

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STRINGENT REGULATIONS PUT PRESSURE ON SMALLHOLDERS

Global consumer demand for tea is growing immensely, as much as five percent a year, in part because of growth in per capita income in China, India and other emerging economies. This has led to significant increases in production, exports and consumption, and pushed market prices to record highs. However, in parallel, problems have emerged.

Tea-producing countries have found it challenging to comply with stringent regulations that limit how much of a chemical can remain on the harvested tea leaves. While importing countries have set these “maximum residue levels” (MRLs) as food safety standards, they are often set without complete understanding of the actual danger they may present to consumers, and complying with them is particularly problematic for smallholders.

Smallholders tend to use less expensive chemicals, which usually means they are older brands, while in many cases manufacturers have not updated their guidelines on how to comply with modern safety standards. Thus, importing countries have estimated residue limits on their own, often setting them much lower than actually

needed for safety – limits that make it difficult for smallholder growers to comply. Also, with importing countries setting their own MRL standards, exporting producers must provide paperwork proving their compliance for each individual destination. Even growers who have no pest problems, and thus use no chemicals, still must go through the time and expense of providing paperwork that proves their compliance.

HARMONIZING STANDARDS TO SUPPORT SMALLHOLDERS

As the number of smallholder tea producers continued to increase in parallel to the introduction of safety standards, these issues became more problematic for the tea industry. In 2001, the FAO Intergovernmental Group (IGG) on Tea, a subsidiary body of the Committee on Commodity Problems (CCP), decided to seek solutions, setting up an initiative to prioritize close cooperation between tea producers, importers, traders, boards, associations and other organizations. Through its working group on MRLs, IGG on Tea coordinated activities with the Codex Alimentarius Commission and other standard-setting bodies to work toward harmonizing standards among tea-importing countries.

Over the following decade, the IGG on Tea brought producers and importers together to sensitize them to each other’s issues, harmonize the residue limits for a number of pesticides in key importing countries, and strengthen networks linking regulatory authorities and the tea trade.

In addition to the working group on MRLs, the IGG on Tea has other working groups that deal with issues of great importance to both smallholders and industrial growers, ranging from requirements of organic tea production to positioning the tea industry to deal with changes in growing conditions brought on by climate change.

Overall, the work of FAO’s IGG on Tea in harmonizing the maximum residue levels has addressed and met the safety concerns of consumers but at the same time has reduced the cost of compliance to the safety standards. This is especially significant, from a food security angle, in major tea-exporting countries such as Sri Lanka and Kenya. Both have US\$1 billion annual food-import costs, but in both countries those costs are totally offset by their export earnings from tea.