

Thailand: group urges curb on use of agricultural chemicals

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The government should curb the use of agricultural chemicals after imports hit a seven-year high in 2011, a non-profit community rights group says, the Bangkok Post reports.

Thailand imported more than 160,000 tonnes of agricultural chemicals, worth up to 22 billion baht, last year _ more than double the 2005 figure when the country imported 78,000 tonnes of farm chemicals, the group said, citing Agriculture Department records.

This year, nearly 120,000 tonnes of farm chemicals, including herbicides, insecticides and fungicides, were imported from January to September, Witoon Lianchamroon, director of the Biodiversity and Community Rights Action Thailand (Biothai), a Bangkok-based non-profit organisation promoting alternative agriculture, said.

Such a heavy reliance on chemicals poses health and safety risks for both farmers and consumers.

Mr Witoon said the purchase of agricultural chemicals accounted for about 30% of farming investment costs.

"The purchase of farm chemicals shouldn't exceed 10% of farming costs," he said. "The record of agricultural chemicals imports in past years shows the import trend is growing. This shows how unhealthy Thai agriculture is."

Four potentially harmful farm chemicals _ **carbofuran**, methomyl, dicotophos and EPN insecticides _ have been imported into Thailand despite being banned in many countries, including as the United States, United Kingdom, Malaysia and Singapore.

The Thailand Pesticide Alert Network (Thai-PAN) recently conducted a test on vegetables sold in Bangkok markets and found traces of the four toxic chemicals in some samples.

In some samples, the contamination level was about 40% higher than the European Union's maximum residue limit of 0.02 mg/kg.

Rice Department records also showed the import of chemicals for use in rice fields had increased from about 8 million kilogrammes in 2010 to about 15 million kilogrammes last year.

Thai-PAN also reported that more than 27,000 brands and types of agricultural chemicals and active ingredients were registered with Thai authorities as of last year, compared to 1,743 in Vietnam, 1,158 in Indonesia and 917 in Malaysia.

The use of farming chemicals will be high on the agenda of this year's National Health Assembly, which begins on December 18 at the Bangkok International Trade & Exhibition Centre (Bitec).

The issue has been included in the assembly's draft resolution, which will call on the government to enforce strict laws and apply effective policies to control the use and the import of agricultural chemical products.

Parts of the resolution, to be submitted to the government at the end of the assembly on Thursday, include calls for the government to ban carbofuran, methomyl, dicotophos and EPN, and to consider taxation on farming chemical imports.

Since 1992, the government has waived tax on such imports, with the aim of reducing farming costs.

However, farmer advocates said the tax exemption was a double-edged sword as it encouraged farmers to use more chemical products.

The president of the Agribusiness Association of Thai People, Weerawat Katanyukul, said the business sector would accept a reasonable import tax for such chemicals. "A 5-10% tax rate would be acceptable," he said.

Mr Weerawat said the increase in farming chemical use was a result of the government's policy to promote rubber and oil palm plantations, where large amounts of chemicals are used.

A government regulation launched last year, which required chemical distributors to re-register their products with authorities, had forced them to stock their goods because they would not be able to import new products during the registration period.

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