

‘Safe’ tag for pesticide-filled water!

Deccan Chronicle checked with the government laboratories about their preparedness to check the pesticide level in water and found that none of them has taken this threat seriously. The National Institute for Inter-disciplinary Science and Technology (NIIST) has found that water in the Periyar River contains large amounts of banned pesticides like endosulfan, DDT and BHC. This has come as shock for people, especially those living in Kochi. But what’s more alarming is that a “safe for drinking” tag was given to water samples from wells and other sources, brought to government laboratories by commercial organisations and members of the public, without the water being checked for the presence of pesticides. The government labs don’t even have a protocol for checking pesticide levels in water samples. What is done in the labs is a check for harmful bacteria, including e-coli and harmful metals like lead. When contacted, R. Ramesh, director of the groundwater department told *Deccan Chronicle* that none of its three labs located in Thiruvananthapuram, Kochi and Kozhikode had the facility to check the presence of pesticides. “We check some 22 parameters and these don’t cover pesticides.” But he acknowledged that the labs would need to be equipped with facilities for checking pesticides in the near future in view of reports that rivers like the Periyar had abnormally high levels of banned pesticides. He also added that the chances of groundwater in the vicinity of Periyar and other rivers getting contaminated with pesticides was high in view of the usage of the water in farms, especially in plantations. Authorities with the government regional analytical laboratory in Kakkanad said that the equipment they have for checking pesticides have actually never worked. “We have equipment for gas chromatography and high pressure liquid chromatography (HPLC) which we got years ago at a cost of Rs 40 lakh. But these have never worked and our complaints to repair them have not been addressed on the grounds of paucity of funds,” a senior official of the lab said on condition of anonymity. He also agreed that water samples that were given the certificate “safe for use” by the lab may not be safe in view of the NIIST study. Hundreds of samples are tested in the lab here, especially those brought by companies making bottled drinking water and soda water as a government lab’s clearance is mandatory. According to environmental scientist Ajith Haridas, a member of the team that studied the Periyar samples, checking for pesticide sediments is a complicated process that requires expertise and special lab equipment. The Periyar samples were checked at the NIIST lab in Thiruvananthapuram which is an advanced one. The labs under the Pollution Control Board and the Kerala Agricultural University (KAU) in Vellanikkara also have the facilities to check for the presence of pesticides, but they are not accessible to members of the public for routine sample checks. Meanwhile, the Kerala Water Authority (KWA) claimed that they do monitor the water of all 44 rivers in Kerala for pesticides at their lab in Nettur near Kochi. “We did not find any significant level of pesticide at the sources of our plants. The Periyar samples must have been collected (by NIIST team) downstream whereas we have plants only upstream of the river,” an official said. However, the official also acknowledged that the KWA has no procedure to treat pesticides if they were present in the water.

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