Alar Five Years Later

By ACSH Staff — February 1, 1994

Executive Summary

In early 1989, this country suffered the public relations equivalent of a natural disaster, one that most scientists now believe should never have occurred. It concerned a little-known chemical called Alar, [Alar is the registered trade name of the Uniroyal Chemical Company] a growth regulator that farmers had used successfully for over 20 years to improve the quality and appearance of apples. But a high-profile environmental group and a popular television show conspired to use Alar to set off a prime-time food scare. That chemical, said the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and the commentator Ed Bradley on 60 Minutes, was the most potent cancer-causing substance in the food supply.

Panic set in overnight and, fed by an orchestrated public-relations campaign, quickly got out of control. Parents poured apple juice down the drain. Stores pulled apple products from their shelves. Apple growers suffered losses estimated at hundreds of millions of dollars. Usually, boasted one of those who helped set off the panic, it takes a significant natural disaster to create this much sustained news attention for an environmental problem.

There has been less news coverage of the fact that study after study has since found that Alar was neither an environmental health problem nor a cause for panic. To date, there is no mainstream, peer-reviewed research to suggest that trace exposures to Alar, of the sort consumers could expect from eating apples or drinking apple juice, have caused so much as a single additional case of cancer.

But five years later, the fallout from this man-made panic still lingers. Growers have never recovered the money they lost. The public remains wary of man-made chemicals, which, ironically, have generated the higher crop yields which now help feed the world. The controversy also distracted Americans from genuine risks of cancer, such as cigarette smoking. This paper summarizes the politics and science surrounding Alar over the last two decades. On this, the fifth anniversary of the scare, the American Council on Science and Health calls for the NRDC to withdraw the report that set off the scare and for 60 Minutes to admit that the scientific evidence does not support the position of their A is for Apple report. These admissions would vindicate the use of a valuable agricultural chemical and emphasize the importance of sound science.