



The Raghavan Report

Safe & quality food: A shared responsibility – Need for busting myths and half-truths

by Raghavan ('Ragha') Sampathkumar



In continuation of my last column, I have recently come across a series of social media posts related to a key food safety issue: i.e. antibiotics in food particularly, their usage in animal production. As I mentioned earlier, genuine concerns are always to be given due consideration and attention by the stakeholders.

But unfortunately, most, if not all that is getting projected in media are negative and any balanced or neutral perspectives never find a place in such skewed and heavily biased discussions.

Similar logic is applied when it comes to usage of pesticides in crops where the industry always supports judicious usage. However, without giving due credits and acknowledging the proactive efforts by the industry to educate the users, these media stories simply throw mud on the industry with an aim to ultimately push for blanket bans on the products.

One must understand depriving the producers of any valuable and research-based tool will only harm the entire food value chain and, particularly, consumers in the end. Through these kinds of scare-mongering and negative propaganda, organisations behind all these stunts are trying to sabotage the regulatory framework that was built based on extensive efforts and research evidence.

In my earlier columns, I have mentioned about “borrowed ideologies” that are simply taken as such from a different part of the world and are applied in another geography with no regard to ground realities. This is what happening with regard to the above issue of antibiotics in meat production. Utopian green concepts are spawned in the media throughout the world in a concerted manner to scare the uninformed public. Most of these media stories are unfounded with probably a supporter or sponsor with ostensible altruism and questionable credibility.

What does not usually get due attention is the other side of the story wherein producers and the input providers who place great emphasis on judicious usage, effective stewardship initiatives like training and capacity building for stakeholders and proactive R&D to develop newer, safer and more effective alternatives. Millions of dollars are spent just to prove something (e.g. a disease or disorder) that has an extremely remote chance of happening due to the use of such inputs, when used judiciously. Of course, those who misuse and abuse any inputs in food production must be dealt with an iron hand through appropriate regulations but it should not penalise the already compliant and quality-focused organised players who do genuine business.

However, what happens due to these kinds of negative publicity, public perception gets awkwardly skewed and influenced to a great extreme. This builds pressure on the policy makers and regulators to think and introduce more regulations that are, in most cases, additional and unnecessary. Hence, cost of compliance for the organised sector in these industries increases and valuable resources, money and time is spent on trivial issues that can be avoided completely.

The bottom-line here is that the industry needs to stand up and raise a unified voice against these scare-mongering tactics with vested interests. Further, policy makers and regulators must put their feet down firmly and decide to take a well-balanced, neutral and science-based perspective while evaluating any tools, or technologies. They should not be bowing down to the forces that have only the objective of unscrupulously disrupting the food industry without any scientific basis.

Media must take a morally correct stand and must verify the facts and truth before publishing such half-truths. Finally, scientists, researchers and other stakeholders must speak the language of consumers. We must take steps to enhance the consumers' understanding of how food is really produced and why they shouldn't believe everything that is projected in media. Again, it is a shared responsibility.

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