The Advisory Committee on Pesticides (ACP) was established in its current form in 1957 to advise UK ministers on all major issues relating to the control of pests. The role of the Committee is set by the Food and Environment Protection Act 1985 (FEPA), which provides that the Committee shall be consulted:

- as to regulations which Ministers contemplate making
- as to approvals which Ministers contemplate giving, revoking or suspending
- as to conditions to which Ministers contemplate making approvals subject

In particular, the law requires the ACP to be consulted about new regulations and any change in the approval of pesticides.

Composition
The Committee comprises a chairman, vice-chairman and approximately 15 members. Most of the members are selected to provide expertise in scientific disciplines relevant to the evaluation of pesticides (see box below). In addition, one member has expertise in organic farming, and there are two lay members, one with a special interest in consumer affairs, and one in environmental issues. The chairman and members of the ACP are appointed following open advertisement and selection procedures in accordance with the recommendation of the Nolan Committee.

It is important that the ACP should be independent of the Government and the pesticide industry. In particular, the chairman should have no financial interests in the industry (e.g. through consultancies or shareholdings). Ideally, the same restriction would apply to all members, but this is not always possible without seriously compromising the function of the Committee. A list of current members and their declared interests is published each year in the ACP's annual report.

Support
The ACP is supported by about 20 “advisers”, mainly from government departments and agencies such as English Nature and the Food Standards Agency. These advisers provide expertise in policy, operational and scientific matters that are not covered by members of the Committee. In addition, each government department involved in the regulatory process has one “assessor” who is responsible for signing off Committee recommendations on behalf of their Minister or for obtaining their Minister’s agreement.

Areas of scientific expertise of ACP members

- human toxicology
- occupational health in agricultural and non-agricultural pest control
- human epidemiology
- ecotoxicology
- fate and behaviour of pesticides in the environment
- pest biology, control and resistance to pesticides
- chemical analysis, metabolism, residues and dietary modelling
- agricultural and non-agricultural practices, trials methodology and interpretation
- assessment of risks and benefits, ideally formulated and expressed in economic terms

The Inter-Departmental Secretariat (IDS) is a body which directly supports the ACP. It is made up of representatives of the regulatory Departments. The IDS considers data supplied in support of applications for approval and evaluates data submitted for the European review programme and applications for new active substances to be listed under Annex I of Directive 91/414/EEC. In some cases regulatory decisions are based directly on the conclusions of the IDS (e.g. approvals for the first experimental use of a new active ingredient or for certain changes in the composition or use of a previously approved pesticide), but the most important issues are referred for consideration by the ACP before advice to Ministers is finalised.

Subcommittees
To assist in its work the ACP has three subcommittees. In addition to some members of the ACP, these committees also include outside experts: representatives of industry, trade unions and consumer groups, and lay members. A full list of members is published in each ACP annual report. Further details of the subcommittees are given in the box below. Some issues are referred to them by the ACP and others are brought forward by the regulatory departments or the members themselves. The main output from the subcommittees is in the form of reports to the ACP, which may then feed into the regulatory process.
Business covered
The ACP meets approximately eight times per year, and a large part of its business is to consider applications for approval and reviews of existing approvals for pesticide products. The law requires that the ACP should be involved in every decision, however minor, to grant, amend or revoke an approval. However, it would be impractical for the Committee to consider every individual decision that the registration authorities make. A system has therefore evolved under which the Committee deals directly with the most important decisions, and sets a framework with which the Pesticides Safety Directory (PSD) and Health and Safety Executive (HSE) work when dealing with the remainder. Thus the ACP looks at the first commercial level approval of active ingredients new to the UK, at reviews, and also at any applications for approval which appear to raise new concerns about safety or generic issues that require clarification.

The ACP does not have the final say in decisions on approvals. Decisions are taken by Ministers who take advice from the ACP. As with other aspects of health and safety, Government policy is that decisions on pesticides must be based on sound science.

Under the new arrangements for the assessment and review of pesticide active ingredients in Europe, certain important parts of the scientific risk assessment (e.g. the ADI and AOEL) will be agreed for the Union as a whole. Increasingly, therefore, the ACP is also involved in reviewing and commenting on draft risk assessments to be put before the European Commission. It is important that these risk assessments should be sound as they will form the basis for any approval of products in the UK that contain the active ingredient in question.

As well as advising on the risk assessment and regulation of specific pesticides, the ACP also addresses more generic issues concerning pesticides and their safety (see box below).

Openness and transparency
At present ACP meetings are not routinely open to the public. One reason for this is that part of the material is commercially secret and cannot legally be divulged to the public. Furthermore, much of the discussion at meetings can be highly technical and may not easily be understood by most members of the general public. However, the agenda and minutes of each meeting are now published on the Internet at http://www.pesticides.gov.uk/committees/acp/acp.htm, the latter within 3 weeks of the meeting. Before the agenda, or the minutes of the corresponding meeting are published, those companies with a particular interest in the items covered (such as an application being considered or an approval being reviewed) are allowed 24 hours to comment on any factual inaccuracies and any details which they believe are covered by commercial secrecy or data protection rules. The published minutes record the advice offered to Ministers with a summary of the discussion. However, Members of the Committee have also requested that a detailed, ‘attributable’ record of the discussion during the meeting should be produced. It is the Committee’s intention that in the near future this will also be published in a similar way to the agenda and minutes.

From 2000 the Committee will hold an annual open meeting at which members of the public can raise and discuss matters relating to the regulation of pesticides that concern them, and is exploring new ways to promote its activities to the general public.

For more information on the ACP see http://www.pesticides.gov.uk/committees/acp/ Also the ACP Annual Report 1999 is available from MAFF Publications, Admail 6000, London SW1A 2XX (tel. 0645 556000)