

The Environmental Working Group Peddlers of Fear

Junk Science Specialists Foment Public Health Scares

By Bonner R. Cohen

Summary: The Environmental Working Group specializes in using unsound science to foment health scares about various foods, pesticides and other products.

On July 30, 2003, readers of the *Washington Post* were confronted with a dire warning of a threat to their health emanating from a most unlikely source. Prominently displayed in the paper's A section was the headline: "Report Suggests High PCB Levels in Farmed Salmon."

The *Post's* environmental reporter began his article on the report in an ominous tone. "A sharp rise in consumption of farmed salmon may be posing a health threat to millions of Americans," he wrote, "because of high levels of PCBs that have been found in limited supplies of the popular fish, according to a study released yesterday."

The *Post* reported the study's findings that 7 of 10 farmed salmon recently purchased in Washington, D.C., San Francisco, Calif., and Portland, Ore. "contained concentrations of PCBs that were 16 times higher than those found in wild salmon fished from the ocean and roughly four times higher than those in beef and other seafood."

In addition to the *Washington Post*, the study was reported in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Associated Press*, *Reuters*, and in scores of other media outlets — print and broadcast — throughout the country. Having found a receptive audience in the media, the orga-



Kenneth Cook, pictured above, is president of the Environmental Working Group. Tides president Drummond Pike is an EWG board member.

nization that released the salmon study, the Environmental Working Group (EWG), could be justly proud of the coverage its findings had received.

What is the EWG? In reporting the salmon study, the *New York Times* described the group as "a non-profit environmental research and advocacy organization financed by private donations." For *Reuters*, EWG was a "a nonprofit organization that investigates environmental issues." The *Wall Street Journal* described the group as a "nonprofit research organization," and the *Washington Post* merely stated that EWG was "an advocacy orga-

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nization.” Such modest descriptions of the organization do a great disservice both to the reading public and to Environmental Working Group.

On its Web site, EWG describes itself as a “not-for-profit environmental research organization that uses the power of information to improve public health and protect the environment by reducing pollution in air, water and food.” The goal of EWG’s research, the Web site explains, “is to turn raw data into usable information.” The question is: usable for whom?

Shortly after EWG’s salmon study was released, the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH) contacted the National Cancer Institute and posed a simple but highly relevant question: “Do you know of any evidence that human exposure to trace elements of PCBs in fish contributes to the toll of human cancer?” the group asked. According to ACSH’s president, Dr. Elizabeth M. Whelan, writing in the August 15, 2003 issue of the *Washington Times*, the National Cancer Institute’s answer was a resounding “no.” Dr. Whelan

went on to point out that conspicuously absent from EWG’s Web site is any reference to scientific credentials or any other information about those who undertook the salmon study.

“This omission,” she pointed out, “is consistent with the fact that the EWG president once conceded to the *Weekly Standard* that the Environmental Working Group does not have a single doctor or scientist on staff.”

Indeed, as John Connelly, president of the National Fisheries Association, pointed out in a letter to the *Wall Street Journal*, the only thing the EWG report indicated was that the small sample of farmed salmon “contained about one one-hundredth of the PCB limit established by FDA [Food and Drug Administration].” Connelly noted further that both wild and farmed salmon contain trace elements of PCBs. “All salmon remain an excellent source of omega-3s,” he stressed, “which help reduce heart attacks, prevent dementia and — as a source of high quality, lean protein — may help control weight.”

ter) organizations that might not satisfy IRS criteria on their own. When in 1996 the Tides Foundation spun off a sister organization, the Tides Center, EWG was quietly shifted to this new independent entity.

EWG’s convoluted money trail caught the attention of Ron Arnold, executive vice president of the Bellevue, Washington-based Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise (CDFE). “I’ve been watching and tracking [EWG] over the years, but they were hiding under the umbrella of the Tides Foundation and practically invisible,” he notes on the website ConsumerFreedom.com. “They were like a secret society, with money coming in and no accountability. But about the time I was finishing my research [*Undue Influence: Wealthy Foundations, Grant-Driven Environmental Groups, and Zealous Bureaucrats That Control Your Future*, Free Enterprise Press, Bellevue, Wash., 1999] they began to emerge as a separate corporation in Washington, D.C., which meant that in the fullness of time, they would have to file their [IRS] Form 990s and we would be able to see a little bit of what they were doing.”

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Funding and Leadership

The Environmental Working Group maintains offices in Washington, D.C. and Oakland, CA. However, until it was incorporated in Washington in 1999, the group was hard to trace. Founder and president Kenneth Cook has often told media outlets that he started EWG in 1993. Yet a number of foundations list grants to EWG as far back as 1989, a year in which Cook was vice president of an environmental publishing house called the Center for Resource Economics/Island Press, then operating under the auspices of the San Francisco-based Tides Foundation (See “The Tides Foundation,” *Foundation Watch* December 2003).

Here’s what happened. Until 1993, Cook used the tax-exempt status of the nonprofit Center for Resource Economics as a cover to receive foundation money, collecting more than \$5 million. In 1993, he moved EWG under the protective umbrella of the Tides Foundation, which, among other things, specializes in lending its tax-exempt status to friendly (i.e., left-of-cen-

ter) organizations that might not satisfy IRS criteria on their own. When in 1996 the Tides Foundation spun off a sister organization, the Tides Center, EWG was quietly shifted to this new independent entity.

And see he did. In February 2002, Arnold’s group filed a complaint with the IRS asking it to revoke EWG’s tax-exempt status. Arnold charges that EWG lobbied Congress to alter the 2002 Farm Bill using a \$1.6 million dollar grant from the Chicago-based Joyce Foundation, and that EWG, while still a part of the Tides Foundation, “hid its lobbying political expenditures.”

The Joyce Foundation grant makes clear that EWG has no fundraising problems. According to its 2001 IRS Form 990, EWG’s income was \$2,238,407 and its expenditures were \$1,960,968. That left end-of-year net assets at \$1,355,186.

The group’s donors include a slew of wealthy foundations besides Joyce. Most are members of the Environmental Grantmakers Association, an “affinity group” of the Council on Foundations. The Association, a project of the Rockefeller Family Fund, promotes networking among like-minded foundations. Over the years its members have contrib-

uted millions of dollars to environmental causes (See Box on page 3).

According to the ActivistCash.com website sponsored by the Center for Consumer Freedom, five foundations have donated over a multi-year period over \$1 million to EWG. The Joyce Foundation leads the pack with total grants of \$5,095,000 (1991-2000). Next are the Ford Foundation with \$3,352,351 (1989-1998), the Blue Moon Fund—a spin-off of the now-defunct W. Alton Jones Foundation—with \$2,620,000 (1989-2001), the Pew Charitable Trusts \$1,995,000 (1990-1997), and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation \$1,455,000 (1989-1999).

EWG is governed by influential, behind-the-scenes movers and shakers. Its founder and president is Kenneth Cook, a former director of media relations at the World Wildlife Fund and a 1988 campaign aide to Michael Dukakis. He is married to Deb Callahan, president of the League of Conservation Voters, a political action committee for the environmental movement. The League distributed \$2.2 million in 1999-2000. Callahan was formerly on Al Gore's staff when he was a U.S. Senator.

The EWG board of directors includes David Fenton, founder of Fenton Communications, the Washington, D.C. public relations firm that worked with the Natural Resources Defense Council to orchestrate the 1989 Alar pesticide scare. Fenton also co-founded Environmental Media Services, which often assists EWG in promoting its reports. EWG's Ken Cook is a board member of Environmental Media Services.

Drummond Pike is another key EWG board member. Pike is president of the Tides Foundation and the Tides Center, which provided the financial and organizational umbrella during EWG's formative years. EWG's vice president and co-founder is Richard Wiles, editor of "Alternative Agriculture." EWG media operations are handled by Michael Casey, who held a similar position with the National Environmental Trust. Casey also was press secretary for the 1992 Clinton-Gore campaign.

Select Foundation Grants Awarded to EWG

Bauman Family Foundation

\$25,000 in 2002

General support

California Wellness Foundation

\$100,000 in 2002

To continue efforts in analyzing and publicizing data on environmental and public health issues in Oakland, CA

Richard & Rhoda Goldman Fund

\$100,000 in 2001

For Chemical Industry Insider Project

Homeland Foundation

\$30,000 in 2000

For Strategic Environmental Research

\$25,000 in 2000

For Whale Conservation

Turner Foundation

\$75,000 in 2001

For general support of research and public education on pesticide policy reform, the impacts of environmental toxins on women and children, and the enforcement of environmental laws

Clarence E. Heller Charitable Foundation

\$200,000 in 2001

For a project to analyze recently available public documents describing the dangers of toxic chemicals and the lack of public spending to support sustainable agriculture

Bill Walker heads EWG's California office. A seasoned activist, Walker has worked for Greenpeace USA and the California League of Conservation Voters. He also serves as "media trainer" for the Ruckus Society, which trains anti-globalization environmental activists. Kelsey Wirth, EWG's treasurer, was a consultant with the World Resources Institute and is the daughter of former Colorado Senator Tim Wirth, current president of Ted Turner's United Nations Foundation.

Phony Health Scares

Like Greenpeace, the Natural Resources Defense Council and other high-profile environmental groups, EWG spe-

cializes in promoting media-driven, scientifically unsupported health scares. Its salmon study is but one in a long line of headline-grabbing EWG reports that have one primary mission: to undermine public confidence in products and technologies that contain man-made chemicals.

By now, the EWG modus operandi is predictable. The group releases a "study," which concludes that exposure to an everyday item—baby food, cosmetics, mother's milk, tap water, fruit and vegetables—poses a risk to human health. The study then follows the model that the NRDC and Fenton Communications developed for the 1989 Alar scare: EWG "find-

ings” typically show that children are most at risk by exposure to the substance in question. The study is then released at a press conference, often arranged by Fenton Communications, with all the trappings of a major scientific breakthrough.

The truth is far different. In fact, EWG avoids conducting peer-reviewed studies, the kind published in scientific periodicals such as *Nature*, *Science* or the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Instead, as Tom and Gretchen Randall note in the December 2003 *Foundation Watch*, EWG studies “are associative in nature, rather than causal.” “Causal studies, which are used in clinical medical research,” they point out, “demonstrate the degree to which a particular pathogen or other agent affects people. Associative studies simply indicate a correlation. If activists were to use associative research and the precautionary principle together, they might well prohibit the use of beds, since most people who die were lying in them.”

Poisoned Tap Water, Baby Food

No substance has attracted more EWG attention than man-made pesticides. In study after study, EWG claims that pesticide residues pose unacceptable risks to human health. Even though pesticides are among the most rigorously tested and highly regulated substances in the United States, EWG persists in alerting the public to their—unproven—harmful effects.

Typical of EWG’s work is a 1997 report entitled “Tough to Swallow: How Pesticide Companies Profit From Poisoning America’s Tap Water.” In its report, which had undergone no independent peer review, EWG claimed that a herbicide known as atrazine was contaminating drinking water supplies in the Midwest. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) standard for atrazine is 3.0 parts per billion (ppb). This notwithstanding, EWG claimed that a level of 0.15 ppb violated federal safety standards.

EWG’s findings were duly reported in the Midwestern press, which prompted the following comment from an official with the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency: “We’re concerned when reports

like this come out because they’re making comparisons based on levels that don’t exist.”

EWG used similar scare tactics in a 1995 study of what it described as “pesticide contamination of baby food.” Here the EWG methodology consisted of buying jars of Gerber, Heinz, and Beech-Nut fruit and vegetable baby food from grocery stores in Philadelphia, Denver, and San Francisco and testing them to see if they contained trace amounts of pesticide residues.

In language chosen to frighten parents, EWG described its findings:

Sixteen pesticides were detected in the 8 baby foods tested, including three probable human carcinogens, five possible human carcinogens, eight neurotoxins, five pesticides that disrupt normal functioning of the hormone system, and five pesticides that are categorized as oral category one, the most toxic designation.

What EWG didn’t say was that the pesticide residues in question are minuscule. Moreover, 99.99 percent of the residues are natural, i.e. plants develop them on their own to ward off diseases, bacteria, fungi and predators. Man-made chemicals account for only 0.01 percent of pesticide residues.

Professor Bruce Ames, director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences at the University of California, Berkeley, described EWG’s baby food study as “...an attempt to scare parents over something that is no threat to their children’s health.”

Ames has gone to great length to explain the issue of risk: “Scares about tiny traces of synthetic chemicals, such as pesticides, are a distraction from important risks,” he told readers of the Canadian women’s magazine *Chatelaine* (July 2000). “The amount of pesticide residues ingested are so small, relative to levels that have been shown to have toxicological effects, they are toxicologically implausible as

health risks.”

The Berkeley scientist is hardly alone. Responsible environmental scientists and officials have ridiculed EWG methods and conclusions despite the uncritical media attention they receive. Here are comments on EWG studies, as reported by ConsumerFreedom.com.:

“Unfortunately, the report is wrong, grossly misleading, suffers from poor research methodologies and techniques, and does the public a disservice by misrepresenting the job entrusted to both the federal and state governments.”

—“*Lack of Evidence: How the Environmental Working Group Misled the Public About Environmental Enforcement*,” *Environmental Council of the States (ECOS)*, nonprofit organization representing state environmental agency directors, reacting to an EWG report, “*Prime Suspects*.” August 2003

“EWG’s approach is more alarmist politics and it lacks sound scientific health or risk assessment information.”

—*The “Environmental Working Group: Working for No One,” a 1999 speech by Sheldon R. Jones, director of the Arizona Department of Agriculture.*

“...politically, not toxicologically driven.”

—*Marcia van Gemert, retired chief of the Toxicology Branch of EPA’s Pesticides Program, describing EWG attacks on pesticides, April 23, 1998.*

“It is clear from the reported results that the Environmental Working Group either did not understand the science behind the ‘scientific sampling,’ or chose to ignore sound science to generate better headlines and sound bites...It is difficult to comment further on the work of EWG, since they have not seen fit to share it with regulatory authorities. Most scientists are eager to have their work peer-reviewed by other scientists. It seems to me that if they were truly concerned about getting methyl bromide use practices changed, they would bring their data to regulatory officials — who have the power to change the rules — before doing it with the press. This is a

publicity stunt, not science.”

—*California Environmental Protection Agency Department of Pesticide Regulation disputes EWG monitoring of methyl bromide, 1996.*

EWG: Trojan Horse for the Organic Food Industry?

EWG attacks on synthetic chemicals are rooted in Rachel Carson’s 1962 bestseller, *Silent Spring*, a misconceived attack on man-made chemicals. Like Carson’s celebrated work, whose literary qualities have guaranteed it a place in many English department reading lists, EWG devotes extraordinary effort to demonizing synthetic chemicals that have protected mankind from insect-borne diseases and increased agricultural productivity. The public is repeatedly told — in the absence of any supporting data — about the dangers to people, particularly children, caused by exposure to trace elements of pesticides.

Widespread use of pesticides has helped create an abundant food supply beyond the imagination of those living just two generations ago. Pesticides are a testimony to human ingenuity in the service of the most elementary human need: providing food to eat. There is no doubt that pesticides are one of the many innovations that have dramatically increased human life expectancy over the past few decades.

But pesticides are EWG’s enemy. It wants to replace them with a far more costly and less productive form of agriculture—organic farming. In 1996 EWG published a “Shopper’s Guide to Pesticides in Produce,” in which it assigned “toxicity scores” to a dozen popular fruit and vegetables. It then revealed its organic agenda. EWG’s Richard Wiles told the *Chicago Tribune*: “Our basic recommendation is to buy organic produce whenever you can get it.”

This is an odd position for an organization ostensibly so concerned about public health and the environment. *Consumer Reports* has found that organic foods cost 57 percent more on average than foods produced by conventional agricultural

methods. This puts organic produce out of reach for people of moderate or lower incomes. Given what is known about the cancer-fighting properties of a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, promoting more costly organic produce, as EWG does, is a sure way to raise the cancer risk of millions of people.

Moreover, organic farming carries added risk. The substitution of manure for chemical pesticides and/or fertilizers increases the risk of “fecal contamination not only of foodstuffs but also of waterways, food poisoning, high levels of natural toxins (e.g., aflatoxins) and allergens, contamination by copper- and sulfur (contaminated with lead)-containing fungicides,” notes Professor J.R. Hillman in a 2000 report to the Scottish Crop Research Institute. “This has resulted,” Hillman adds, in the “production of blemished, diseased, and irregular produce of low consumer and food processor acceptability, low productivity, and creation of reservoirs of pests and diseases.”

Friend of Trial Lawyers

EWG also appears to have a cozy relationship with the nation’s trial lawyers. Manhattan Institute fellow Walter Olson notes on his tort reform website OverLawyered.com (May 23, 2001 Pt.III) that PBS aired a Bill Moyers special called “Trade Secrets” on March 26, 2001. Olson notes that the program, a rambling attack on the chemical industry, appeared at the same time that EWG produced an ad to encourage lawyers to consult its website to review an archive of fifty years of internal chemical industry documents containing 35,000 industry meeting minutes, memos and letters. “Thought the Cigarette Papers Were Big?” [EWG advertisement] appeared on one of the FindLaw e-mail services. Another notice for the archives’ availability to lawyers appeared on the website www.netforlawyers.com/chemical_records.htm.

Interestingly, EWG enjoys grants from the Florence and John Schumann Foundation whose president is—Bill Moyers. In 1999, EWG received a \$15,000 Schumann grant for a newspaper ad describing “the continuing problem with pesticides in the

food supply.” One wonders whether there are any PBS guidelines on when television producers can create programs intended to assist lawsuits.

There is no doubt that EWG reports are used by personal injury attorneys. InjuryBoard.com is an online tool created by personal injury attorneys to solicit participants in class action suits (“If you or a family member have been injured, contact an attorney today. Just fill out InjuryBoard.com’s questionnaire and have an attorney evaluate your case, free of charge.”) EWG research topics dovetail nicely with InjuryBoard.com solicitations. They include:

- Arsenic
- Asbestos
- Chlorine
- Diazinon
- Ford Explorer
- Lead
- Mercury
- MTBE
- PCBs
- Perchlorate
- Pesticides

Because EWG uses its junk science-laden reports as fodder for class-action lawsuits, the organization has achieved an influence that far exceeds many better-known environmental organizations. The Sierra Club, NRDC, and Environmental Defense have more employees and bigger budgets. But by focusing on a narrow range of hot topics and by playing fast and loose with the facts, EWG has proven adept at “turning raw data into useable information.” It’s an effective voice for an irresponsible cause.

Bonner R. Cohen is a senior fellow at the National Center for Public Policy Research in Washington, D.C.

BrieflyNoted

On December 3, a U.S. district judge in Detroit heard arguments in the first legal challenge to the section of the **USA Patriot Act** that allows federal agents to obtain such things as library lists and medical information. The **American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)** filed the suit on behalf of the Muslim Community Association of Ann Arbor and five other nonprofits. The ACLU says that Section 215 of the Patriot Act, which allows the FBI access to any “tangible things” including books and documents obtained through an order from a secret court, fails to require investigators to show probable cause. The ACLU’s Ann Beeson said the range of things obtainable under the law is “limitless.” The government says the law does not violate the Fourth Amendment because the right to privacy does not apply to information given to third parties. The ACLU says the law has hurt its clients by making them afraid of attending religious services and donating to charity.

The **ACLU** praised a new study that reports that only a small percentage of the 6,400 terrorism suspects arrested since September 11 were actually charged with terrorism. The report, prepared by Syracuse University’s **Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC)**, says that since the September 11 attacks only 879 cases have led to convictions, and the defendants in fewer than half of those – 373 – were sent to prison. The ACLU says the TRAC study “dramatically diminishes” the credibility of the Bush Administration’s public claims of success in the war on terrorism. Says ACLU legislative counsel Timothy Edgar, “Through the misclassification of non-terrorism cases, the Justice Department is able to tweak their record of success in the war on terrorism, and then use the resulting and undeserved kudos from Congress and the public to justify expansions of their surveillance and policing power.” But Justice Department spokesman Mark Corallo questioned TRAC’s methodology and analysis, saying the report “ignores the value of early disruption of potential terrorist acts by proactive prosecution of terrorism-related targets on less serious charges.”

Discontent is growing within the ranks of the 400,000-member **National Audubon Society** over the national leadership’s apparent decision to focus on educational outreach at the expense of political activism. One of the National Audubon’s new initiatives is to build hundreds of educational centers across the country. But Audubon members claim the national leadership is more interested in fundraising than getting involved in conservation fights. In addition, members are unhappy with the national office stripping local chapters of most of their dues, causing some chapters to close and fueling a decline in membership. A spokesman for the Audubon Society, John Bianchi, says the organization needs to change to strengthen its base. “Ultimately, we have to adapt or we cease to become effective,” said Bianchi.

YWCA affiliates are demanding that the national leadership change its mandatory policy on female-only leadership. The YWCA’s current national policy is that men can be admitted as associate members and hired staff, but cannot be voting members or directors. However, YWCA affiliates are unilaterally changing their bylaws in defiance of national rules. Pro-change officials argue that men who support the YWCA core mission—empowerment of women and ending racism—are valuable allies. YWCA officials who oppose admitting men point to a vote at the 2001 national convention reaffirming the women-only policy. The debate comes at a sensitive time for the 145-year-old organization. Patricia Ireland, former president of the National Organization for Women, was fired in October after just six months as national chief executive. The YWCA’s National Coordinating Board has formed a task force to study the issue.

