Poisoning the Well of Information: How Food Safety Data Disputes Threaten South African Agriculture

The recent dispute between FDA Laboratories and the African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) over pesticide residues in South African foods is a textbook case of how valid data can be transformed into public alarm through selective interpretation. Whether characterised as misinformation, disinformation, or simply confusion, the consequences for the agricultural sector are real and potentially devastating.

The Same Data, Different Conclusions

The ACB commissioned SANAS-accredited testing of 43 food products. The laboratory work was conducted by FDA Laboratories, which has since made clear that its role was "limited to generating analytical test data" and that it "does not endorse the interpretations" in the report.

The point of contention is a single number. FDA Laboratories asserts that "only one of the 43 products exceeded the applicable South African, Codex, and European Union MRLs". The ACB concluded that 13 product-pesticide combinations exceeded regulatory limits. Both statements are truthful; they simply apply different benchmarks. The ACB compared results against four benchmarks, while the FDA applied a narrower set.

As FDA Laboratories Technical Director Azel Swemmer observed: "Analytical results must be read within the correct scientific and regulatory context. When this does not happen, the conclusions can give consumers the impression that food products are unsafe, when the data does not support that conclusion".

The ACB insists its role is to "interpret those results in the public interest" as a public-interest organisation with a constitutional mandate for research and advocacy on food safety.

Understanding Information Disorder

The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Interest Groups, Lobbying and Public Affairs distinguishes between three related concepts. **Misinformation** is false information shared without intent to cause harm. **Disinformation** is false information knowingly created with the intention of manipulating public opinion. **Malinformation** is genuine information published with the aim of causing harm.

The ACB-FDA dispute falls into a more subtle category: **false context** and **misleading content**, the selective presentation of genuine facts in ways that distort understanding. Both parties agree on the laboratory results; the disagreement is entirely about interpretation. The disagreement reflects not a dispute about facts, but about how those facts should be interpreted.

What Is at Stake for Agriculture

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The dispute unfolds against the backdrop of the South African Human Rights Commission's National Investigative Hearing into the Food Systems of South Africa. The Commission noted a painful contradiction: South Africa possesses the agricultural capacity to feed its population, yet food insecurity affects 22.2% of households.

The economic stakes are substantial. In the first quarter of 2026, agricultural exports reached a record R67 billion, an 11% increase year-on-year. The sector grew by 3.9%, its sixth consecutive quarter of expansion. Agriculture accounts for 40% of South Africa's total trade surplus. The African continent accounts for 44% of agricultural exports, with the EU as a critical market.

How Information Contamination Affects Policy and Markets

The African Centre for Biodiversity's pesticide report entered the policy and public discourse space, and was mentioned in the second leg of the SAHRC inquiry into food systems. The report also served as the foundation for the Daily Maverick webinar titled "Poison on Your Plate". The SAHRC has previously urged the state to ban hazardous pesticides, arguing that "profits cannot be prioritised over human life". This signals significant regulatory upheaval ahead.

The economic transmission mechanisms are not hypothetical. Export market access is threatened as MRLs are a growing trade policy issue. A food safety scare, even if based on contested interpretations, can accelerate regulatory tightening. Producer costs will rise if farmers must adjust pesticide use to meet stricter standards. Consumer trust can shift, reducing demand for staple products. Reputational damage can tarnish South Africa's agricultural exports in ways that outlast the immediate controversy.

The ACB has revealed that FDA Laboratories' legal representatives sent "threatening and intimidatory letters" demanding the removal of all references to the laboratory. These legal threats underscore the high stakes involved.

Countermeasures and the Real-World Consequences

The Palgrave Encyclopedia identifies several approaches to combating information manipulation. Journalistic approaches require fact-checking and balanced reporting. Technology can identify inaccurate information, though this dispute is about interpretation. Pre-bunking involves countering misinformation in advance. The agricultural sector must communicate its own narrative about food safety and regulatory standards.

Whether the ACB's report represents mischievous advocacy, a genuine misunderstanding, or intentional alarm-raising, the consequences are real. The agricultural sector now faces heightened regulatory scrutiny, potential damage to export markets, and erosion of consumer trust.

The Palgrave Encyclopedia reminds us that information manipulation need not involve outright falsehoods. It operates through contested interpretations, selective framing, and disagreements about what constitutes valid expertise. The public is left to navigate competing claims: 13 exceedances versus one.

In an economy where agricultural exports reached R67 billion in the first quarter of 2026, the cost of information contamination is measured in real economic terms: lost market access, increased regulatory costs, and diminished competitiveness. South Africa's agricultural sector cannot afford to

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be a passive bystander. It must engage proactively with the science, the communication, and the policy processes that shape the regulatory environment.

The FDA-ACB dispute is a cautionary tale: valid data, interpreted and presented without adequate context, can create public alarm that no amount of subsequent clarification can fully undo. Whether the motive is mischief, misunderstanding, or deliberate manipulation, the implications are the same, and they are real.

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