Recently, I received a letter from a high school student who lives in Pennsylvania. She was writing a research paper and wanted our help. The title was, “Pesticide Abuse and Pesticide Danger.”

The letter bothered me deeply. First because the title summarized everything she knew about modern pesticide technology. Second, because she isn’t alone in her views. For many people, pesticides mean either abuse or danger.

I don’t agree with that view, of course. I see the commitment the industry has to testing its products, the emphasis on minimizing risks, the efforts to train pesticide applicators around the world, and the constant reappraisal of the industry’s methods to keep improving. As my industry colleague, Dale Wolf of DuPont, said at last year’s annual meeting of the National Agricultural Chemicals Association (NACA): “The highest priority of your companies and mine was, is and will continue to be the safe manufacture, transportation, use and disposal of agrichemicals.” Those aren’t hollow words.

In fact, I see a responsible industry that makes products that provide great benefits by controlling pests that attack crops, homes and health. And I see a scientific community that is beginning to put the possible risks of pesticides in a clear, less frightening perspective.

But I also try to understand why many people are concerned about our products. To a great degree, it’s because of the success of the environmental movement in changing the way everyone from activists to industrialists views the world around them. We’re more aware, more sensitive and more responsive. It’s a positive change.

It’s also the result of technological change. We can now detect materials in the environment that we never knew existed there before. Parts per billion, trillion and quadrillion are extremely minute traces of any material,
but these words are the language of modern contamination. Our ability to understand what those traces mean isn't always so advanced.

Concern is also the result of extremely effective actions by activist groups. From Earth Day on, the mistakes, misjudgments and stumblings of all industries have been chronicled, spotlighted and rehashed at every opportunity—often, long after the effective changes have been made. It's all made to order for a news media which delights in high drama and controversy.

And the industry has brought some of the concerns upon itself. As criticism mounted, we often became reactive and combative. Or worse, we ignored legitimate concerns, even when we had the answers. We should have heeded Winston Churchill when he said, "I do not resent criticism, even when, for the sake of emphasis, it parts for a time with reality."

I'm not always so generous. I do believe that, at times, environmental crises over pesticides are manufactured for maximum effect. Moreover, some critics relish the fight more than the solution. But the vast majority of concerned people are sincere and deserve a response based on facts, not on hurt feelings.

The facts do support pesticides. This is not to argue that they are always safe, everywhere. Pesticides are chemicals designed to control insects, weeds, fungi, nematodes and other pests. They are biologically active and, to a greater or lesser degree, toxic. They must be used carefully and according to label instructions. But they can be and are used safely and produce benefits for millions of people.

My industry accepts its responsibilities in the area of product safety. Pesticides undergo incredible testing—often more than 100 different kinds of health and environmental studies which require thousands of individual analyses. These products must be effective while not posing unacceptable risks to humans, livestock, the environment or food. To establish that, we do tests on efficacy, crop safety, short- and long-term toxicology, metabolism in crops and animals, residue and environmental fate.

The Industrial Bio-Test (IBT) Laboratory scandal in the mid-1970s tarnished the reputation of pesticide testing, and IBT has become the rallying cry for other irresponsible charges against the industry. But the legacy of IBT is becoming history as new tests are completed. At Monsanto, we've strengthened our supervision of outside laboratories and moved a sizable percentage of testing to our own facility. We're proud of our tough standards for testing and the quality of our science.

Our industry also backs a strong, well-funded EPA. It's in the best interest of the manufacturer, the customer and the public that the EPA have the resources it needs to do an intense and thorough evaluation of all pesticide applications for registration. And the agency does a good job under tough conditions. It is expected to provide scientific standards and methods to what are often emotional or political questions. We don't always