

Farmworkers Protest EPA's Pesticide Ruling

As part of President Trump's campaign against President Obama's environmental regulations, Trump's EPA has rejected a proposed rule banning a brain-damaging pesticide, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

The decision by President Trump's Environmental Protection Agency to rebuff the advice of its own scientists to ban the brain-damaging pesticide chlorpyrifos has prompted protests from California's farm worker communities, now demanding an immediate statewide ban of the dangerous chemical.

A delegation delivered more than 167,000 petition signatures along with a letter signed by 75 organizations representing hundreds of thousands of Californians. The petition was also co-signed by Care2, Center for Biological Diversity, Center for Environmental Health, Center for Food Safety, Courage Campaign, CREDO, Friends of the Earth, and Pesticide Action Network.

EPA scientists have documented that chlorpyrifos can cause serious and profound neurological and respiratory damage, as well as developmental delays, autism and IQ loss for children – even in very small doses, say the activists.

They maintain that the use of chlorpyrifos is particularly problematic in California, “where more than one million pounds of the neurotoxic organophosphate pesticide are used each year, much of it in close proximity to schools and residences. Accounting for roughly 10% of the nationwide total, this chemical is applied on dozens of crops in the state. In the Monterey Bay Area, chlorpyrifos is most heavily used on wine grapes, Brussels sprouts, and apple orchards. In 2016, the air monitor at the Salinas Airport registered average air levels of chlorpyrifos three times higher than the EPA's target risk level.”

According to Californians for Pesticide Reform (CPR), a statewide coalition of more than 190 organizations, “after years of stalling, EPA was set to implement a ban on chlorpyrifos use on food crops in March. But under intense pressure from Dow Chemical, the largest manufacturer of the neurotoxic pesticide, EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt reversed the agency's plan and announced he was allowing continued agricultural use of chlorpyrifos.”

The group's statement went on to say “just last November, the EPA announced that it intended to revoke all food tolerances of chlorpyrifos, calling exposure to any amount unsafe. Underscoring the importance of this proposed ban, the agency

cited the serious dangers of chlorpyrifos exposure and added that young children risk exposure from food residues alone that are 14,000 percent higher than the level EPA currently believes is safe.”

I spoke with Lucia Calderon, an organizer with Safe Ag Safe Schools and Californians for Pesticide Reform, about the battle against chlorpyrifos.

Dennis Bernstein: Tell us exactly what it is – what’s the chemistry we’re talking about here? And then we’ll talk about how dangerous it is.

Lucia Calderon: Chlorpyrifos is an organophosphate insecticide, and its main action is to harm the brains of the insects that the agricultural industry is trying to kill. And, incidentally, it has been shown to really, really harm brains, especially children’s developing brains.

DB: Children’s developing brains – say a little bit more about that. Are there cases? Are there studies being conducted now? Are there examples of kids being hurt? What can you say about that?

LC: Yeah, well this is a really historical issue. Chlorpyrifos was actually banned for residential use. It started being phased out in 2000, because of its proven association with developmental harm. And UC Berkeley and Columbia University both had big parts in these studies. In 2000 the science was known that chlorpyrifos was extremely harmful to developing brains and bodies, and it was banned for residential use.

But nowadays it is not banned for agricultural use, and it’s still being used in our fields, especially in California fields. We account for a fifth of the entire nation’s use of this chemical pesticide. And so, what we’re looking at is science that has been established, and is continuing to come out, showing these really detrimental effects of this chemical. And there is complete inaction on the federal level.

DB: So the EPA was set to pass a ban on this, right? Until the new folks came in?

LC: Yes, exactly. The EPA was set on a deadline to revoke the tolerances of this chemical on March 31, 2017, and just a couple of days before that date our new EPA administrator, Scott Pruitt, reversed that ban. So what we’re doing now is going to the State of California. As a big user of chlorpyrifos, we are demanding that the State of California impose a ban on this chemical. And, as I mentioned the science before, a lot of it is coming out of California. We have the UC Berkeley CHAMACOS study, which stands for the Center for Health of Mother and Children of the Salinas Valley, right where Safe Ag Safe Schools is located. That study has been going on for almost 20 years, showing the connections

between prenatal organophosphate chlorpyrifos exposure and lowering IQ, and respiratory issues as well.

DB: Tell us a little bit about who's involved. Your group is working with the Pesticide Action Network: are there community groups or teachers involved? How are you bringing in the families?

LC: Californians for Pesticide Reform is a statewide coalition, and Safe Ag Safe Schools is only one of the organizations involved. And we represent the communities of the front line. We are from the affected communities, and we all get to come together through this statewide coalition, and then demand improvements and better protections for people living on the front lines of pesticide exposure – those working in the fields and living and attending school very close to the fields.

DB: Are there still problems in terms of schools? Does that come into it?

LC: Yes, definitely. And even regarding chlorpyrifos, we have a city in Monterey County, Greenfield, and two schools there – the middle school and the high school – rank 9th and 4th in the state for chlorpyrifos use within a quarter of a mile. We're seeing issues with chlorpyrifos being applied around schools and we're also just seeing issues with pesticide use in general around schools.

The most recent action we've had on that was establishing buffer zones around schools where pesticides could not be applied. We have been demanding for years a full mile buffer zone at all times around schools, where pesticides cannot be applied. And what we got were quarter mile buffer zones for parts of the day – from 6am to 6pm Monday through Friday. So we're still fighting on that front as well. Right now we're really trying to get chlorpyrifos banned, because it's one of the nastiest chemicals out there.

DB: This is incredibly important because it affects children and their ability to learn. I understand that some of this, depending upon how you're doused with this, could cause permanent damage, particularly in pregnant women and young, formative kids.

LC: Yes, one of the reasons that the federal EPA was going to ban the chemical was that the U.S. EPA found that for pregnant women and developing babies and for some children just the amount of chlorpyrifos they were consuming on food as food residue was way too high. The reason that the EPA was banning it was not only for food residues, but for how much is in the air. There's also no safe amount of chlorpyrifos in drinking water, and it has contaminated a lot of our water supplies as well. So the danger is on all fronts, but especially for women of childbearing age and young children.

DB: And I'm gonna spell that because the name is a little bit unclear: it's c-h-l-o-r-p-y-r-i-f-o-s – that's the brain-harming chemistry that we're talking about?

LC: Exactly, and it is produced by Dow AgroSciences.

DB: Dow?

LC: Yes, Dow Chemical. The CEO of Dow Chemical [Andrew Liveris] is the head of the American Manufacturing Council. Dow Chemical contributed a million dollars to Trump's inauguration dinner. We're now hearing reports that Scott Pruitt met with Dow right before he decided to reverse the ban of chlorpyrifos. So they're a really big actor in this fight right now.

DB: Yeah, and they certainly have the reputation, shall we say, for doing terrible things to people. We thank you for this important information.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
