

How Has This Pesticide Not Been Banned?

Government scientists say chlorpyrifos is unsafe. And yet it's still in use.

By The Editorial Board

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The pesticide known as chlorpyrifos is both clearly dangerous and in very wide use. It is known to pass easily from mother to fetus and has been linked to a wide range of serious medical problems, including impaired development, Parkinson's disease and some forms of cancer. That's not entirely surprising. The chemical was originally developed by Nazis during World War II for use as a nerve gas.

Here's what is surprising: Tons of the pesticide are still being sprayed across millions of acres of United States farmland every year, nearly five years after the Environmental Protection Agency determined that it should be banned.

The E.P.A. proposed a full federal ban after its scientists concluded that there was substantial risk for children and developing fetuses. But federal officials backed off the proposal soon after President Trump took office, and then reversed it completely this past July. The agency now says the data on chlorpyrifos is insufficient and unreliable, but that argument cuts against well-established scientific opinion and years of careful study by E.P.A. experts.

With the federal government abdicating its responsibility, individual states have been left to fill the void. Hawaii and California have issued statewide bans, and several other states, including New Jersey, are taking steps to do the same. The New York attorney general is spearheading a lawsuit against the E.P.A., contending the agency broke the law when it reversed course on the federal ban of chlorpyrifos. And New York's State Legislature passed, with broad bipartisan support, a bill to ban the chemical. Nearly 100 medical, consumer and environmental organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, supported the measure.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo, however, vetoed that bill. Mr. Cuomo promises to institute a ban on the pesticide — and quickly, by July 2021 — but says that his administration will accomplish this goal through regulations, not legislation. That's an unfortunate choice. Regulations tend to be far more vulnerable to legal challenge and other stalling tactics, including regulatory hearings that could take years even to schedule, than actual laws. It's hard to see why the governor would forgo the latter option, especially when he had it sitting right in front of him.

The chemical industry and some farmers have lobbied intensively against a chlorpyrifos ban, insisting that there are no effective alternatives. That's a specious argument. The pesticide was recently banned in the European Union, and farmers in the United States and abroad have already started to replace it with safer alternatives, including integrated pest management. California has paired its statewide chlorpyrifos ban with nearly \$6 million in funding to help develop those alternatives. A nationwide effort to do the same would only accelerate that process.

The health risks posed by continued spraying of chlorpyrifos are especially high for farmworkers and rural communities. But the E.P.A. has found that young children everywhere are exposed to the chemical — at levels 140 times higher than the agency's safety threshold — through the simple act of eating.

In 2018, a panel of federal judges ordered the Trump administration to ban chlorpyrifos in accordance with the E.P.A.'s initial findings. But the administration appealed — a legal battle that is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. The administration also locked the release of a federal report indicating that chlorpyrifos poses a direct threat to more than 1,000 species that are already at risk of extinction. (Corteva Agriscience, the pesticide's manufacturer, donated \$1 million to Mr. Trump's inauguration committee.)

Banning a chemical as clearly dangerous as chlorpyrifos should not be this difficult. A better functioning E.P.A. would do just that, heeding the conclusions of its own scientists and honoring the agency's stated mission.

Instead, countless children are being routinely exposed to an unnecessary risk, while the nation waits for someone — anyone — to take a stronger stand.