EPA Rejects Ban On Common Pesticide Linked to Brain Damage in Children

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A plane sprays pesticides over crops in California. The state is one of a few that has recently moved to ban chlorpyrifos. (AP Photo/Gary Kazanjian, File) ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Environmental Protection Agency on Thursday said it would not ban chlorpyrifos, a pesticide used for killing insects, citing a lack of scientific evidence and drawing ire from environmental groups that say it could cause harm to the children of women who are exposed to the pesticide when pregnant.

While the agency banned the indoor use of chlorpyrifos in 2000, the chemical

is still widely used in the agricultural industry to protect crops, especially corn, from insects. The pesticide, which is produced by Corteva, an agricultural chemical company formerly part of DowDuPont, and goes by the brand names Dursban and Lorsban, is also regularly used on golf courses to kill worms, fire ants and other bugs.

Environmental groups that have challenged the agency in court say there's ample scientific evidence to show that chlorpyrifos is dangerous to children's neurological development, such as a 2006 study that shows that children who are exposed to chlorpyrifos in the womb are at risk of delayed physical and mental development as well as attention and hyperactive disorder problems. In a 2016 memorandum, the EPA itself stated, "there is evidence of delays in mental development in infants (24-36 months), attention problems and autism spectrum disorder in early childhood, and intelligence decrements in school age children who were exposed to OPs during gestation." OP's refer to organophosphates, a class of chemicals that includes chlorpyrifos.

"By allowing chlorpyrifos to stay in our fruits and vegetables, Trump's EPA is breaking the law and neglecting the overwhelming scientific evidence that this pesticide harms children's brains," said Patti Goldman, an attorney for Earthjustice, a legal organization involved in the battle. "But this is only a setback," Goldman said in a press statement. "Lawmakers in states like Hawaii and New York are now showing the rest of the country that banning this dreadful pesticide is not only possible, but inevitable."

The EPA, however, has argued the scientific proof needed to ban the chemical was too weak. "Despite several years of study, the science addressing neurodevelopmental effects [of chlorpyrifos] remains unresolved," said a statement released by the federal agency.

In a statement to Bloomberg Environment, Corteva said that it agreed with

the FDA's decision and said that there are "more than 4,000 studies and reports examining the product in terms of health, safety and the environment."

The ruling, made under Trump appointee Andrew Wheeler, stems from legal challenges that likely won't end with Thursday's decision.

In 2017, the EPA rejected a petition against chlorpyrifos brought by the Pesticide Action Network North America (PANNA) and the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), a decision applauded by several agriculture industry groups. ""Effective pest management requires access to a variety of treatments, including chlorpyrifos," Wesley Spurlock, then-president of the National Corn Growers Association, said at the time. "If we become too reliant on a single tool, it can start to lose its effectiveness, and that's how resistance develops. Farmers need access to many crop protection tools to ensure all tools can remain effective."

Earthjustice, on behalf of 12 public interest groups, appealed the decision, and in April, a federal appeals court ordered the EPA to make a final decision.

On Thursday, under pressure from that court-ordered deadline, the EPA again rejected calls to institute a ban, saying there was a lack of "valid, complete, and reliable evidence."

"I think it's absolutely shocking," said Robin Whyatt, a Professor at the Columbia Center for Children's Environmental Health, of the EPA's ruling. Whyatt was one of the co-authors of a seminal 2006 paper linking chlorpyrifos to delayed childhood development.

Before the household ban on chlorpyrifos, children were commonly exposed to the chemical by crawling over contaminated surfaces or playing with toys.

While the rate of exposure is now lower for children living in urban areas, the children of farm workers are still at risk because the pesticide can be "taken home" by clinging to clothes and other surfaces. Whyatt disputes the idea that the EPA does not have enough scientific evidence to ban the pesticide. "The epidemiologic evidence is very strong," she said, chlorpyrifos "damages the babies' brains."

Chlorpyrifos' days may be numbered, regardless. Several states, including Hawaii, California and New York have recently passed bans on chlorpyrifos, though these bans may take several years to take full effect. This past March, Senator Tom Udall (D-N.M.) introduced legislation to prohibit the use of chlorpyrifos on food nationwide.

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