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WHAT'S A LITTLE CANCER, ANYWAY?

California poised to approve deadly pesticide for strawberry crop

by Tom Laskawy 2 Jun 2010 12:09 PM

The continuing disaster in the Gulf of Mexico helps one see other regulatory controversies in a different light. Take, for example, the battle in California over the use of the pesticide methyl iodide, a chemical so toxic, according to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "that even chemists are reluctant to handle it."

Methyl iodide, which according to chemist and pesticide expert Susan Kegley can cause neurological damage and fetal death in laboratory animals even at low doses and has links to thyroid disease, including cancerous tumors of the lungs and brain, is about to be approved for widespread use in the Golden State. It's a soil-sterilizing chemical meant as a replacement for the now-banned methyl bromide, an ozone-depleting chemical that's a key pesticide for conventional strawberry growers. The Bush EPA approved methyl iodide in 2007 over the objections dozens of scientists (including 5 Nobel laureates), in what Grist's Tom Philpott decried as an example of "unchecked crony capitalism." And now that tragedy is being replayed as a western farce.



As Kegley told the *Chronicle*, "The state's own scientists concluded that the chemical posed a potential risk to public health. The department then appointed an outside review panel, which essentially came out with the same results."

But no matter, says California's Department of Pesticide Regulation. They've got this whole thing under control:

[State spokesperson Lea] Brooks said the department incorporated many of the review panel's suggestions in the final risk assessment.

"However, the members are experts in assessing pesticide risks, not in regulatory risk management that leads to decisions on registration," Brooks wrote in an e-mail to The Chronicle. "Panel members were not familiar with the many options and measures that can be put into place by risk managers to avoid unsafe exposure levels."

"Risk managers?" You mean, like BP had to make sure all the safety protocols were followed? Or maybe she means the risk managers like the big banks used? In the 21st century, we've learned that the nine most terrifying words in the English language are, "I'm from Risk Management, and I'm here to help."

The plan is to use tarps and plant buffer zones and stuff. So chill out, people. It's not like anyone might ignore the rules, or take a shortcut, or something unexpected might happen, like a gust of wind kicks up and blows a tarp away. Not gonna happen.

Kegley, for her part, expects thyroid cancer rates to increase if methyl iodide is approved. The most likely victims will be migrant farm workers and small children living near agricultural areas. Small price to pay, no doubt, for bumper strawberry crops, wouldn't you say?



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