

“Team Atrazine” tries out new talking points

Sep 16, 2010 by Karl Tupper



As EPA’s scientific advisory panel [continues its investigation](#) of atrazine this week, supporters of the pesticide have mounted a coordinated media blitz. It’s made for some fascinating reading.

Some background: EPA is holding a series of meetings this year to reexamine Syngenta’s controversial herbicide atrazine — the one that [contaminates 93.9% of drinking water samples tested by the USDA](#), [turns male frogs into females](#), and [was banned across Europe back in 2004](#).

NRDC’s Jen Sass has been attending the meeting in person and [reports](#) that it’s not going well for Syngenta: “Atrazine [is] associated with human health harms - EPA says so!”

Syngenta and other Big Ag interests are in a panic, issuing press releases, placing Op Eds, and promoting studies of questionable methodological rigor - all predictable enough. What’s interesting is the new messaging tack of late. Some examples:

- Monday’s [press release](#) by the National Corn Growers Association says that atrazine is “[t]he most studied herbicide in the world, with more than 6,000 studies on record,” and claims that “EPA is carrying out this reevaluation outside of normal procedures due to unsubstantiated activist claims based upon incendiary rhetoric.”
- Last week’s vaguely threatening [letter](#) to EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson from the “Triazine Network”^{*} claims that “EPA’s unscheduled and rushed re-review departs from the normal regulatory process,” and expressed concern about alleged “serious irregularities in the EPA’s current re-review of the herbicide atrazine.”

These are but two of what appears to be the atrazine lobby’s new set of talking points, designed to cast doubt about atrazine’s hazards by throwing up a smoke screen. They go something like this:

1. The current review of atrazine is somehow unusual or out of the ordinary, and
2. It’s unnecessary, because 6,000 previous studies have proven atrazine safe, and because EPA just completed a review of atrazine a few years ago.

The fact is, so many disturbing studies have come out in the few years since EPA’s last review that

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were the Agency to wait for the next review cycle (2013) to attend to the matter, it would be a lot like driving around a smoking, sputtering car, refusing to pull over and pop the hood, because your next scheduled oil change isn't for another 1,500 miles. Meanwhile, your transmission's on its way out.

Atrazine is not the kind of chemical we can afford to ignore. We're talking about the second most used pesticide in the U.S. — 75 million pounds applied every year. Thousands of farmers are exposed, [the drinking water of millions of Americans is contaminated](#), and [75% of streams in agricultural areas are fouled](#). The stakes are too high to put off a thorough investigation.

And what are these new studies that EPA needs to look at? Here's a small sampling:

- [Ochoa-Acuña 2009](#) found that atrazine, and perhaps other co-occurring herbicides in drinking water, are associated with low birth weights;
- [Winchester 2009](#), [Mattix 2007](#) and [Waller 2010](#) found correlations between atrazine exposure and the incidence of various birth defects;
- [Hayes 2010](#) showed that 10% of male tadpoles raised in atrazine-laced water develop into female frogs. The amount of atrazine in the water was 2.5 ppb; federal standards allow up to 3 ppb in drinking water.

Plus new, more expansive drinking water monitoring data is now available. The data was generated by Syngenta, but it's [NRDC's analysis](#) of it that I'd recommend reading. And these studies are just the tip of iceberg.

And what about those 6,000 studies that supposedly prove atrazine is safe? The majority of them were conducted by—you guessed it—[the pesticide companies that make atrazine](#). What's more, most of them have never faced public scrutiny or been published in peer reviewed scientific journals, because they've been cloaked under the veil of “confidential business information.”

EPA is charged with protecting farmers, farmworkers, the general public and the environment from pesticides. The Agency would be shirking this responsibility if it were to simply ignore the mountain of new evidence questioning atrazine's safety. So don't be fooled by the atrazine lobby's spin: this review is timely and necessary, and we should be applauding the Agency for taking it on.

*The Triazine Network is an industry front group founded in 1995 by agricultural trade groups to keep atrazine (a triazine pesticide) on the U.S. market.

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