

Senator Feinstein urges U.S. EPA to reconsider strawberry pesticide

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Agency to open public comment on methyl iodide; Washington State rejects use

SAN FRANCISCO -- Citing overwhelming scientific concern and evidence that links methyl iodide to miscarriages and cancers, Senator Dianne Feinstein has asked federal EPA decision-makers to reconsider their approval of the pesticide that would mostly be used in California's strawberry fields. In the wake of Feinstein's request, and Washington State's refusal to use the pesticide, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) will take public comment on a petition filed by health, labor and environmental groups to ban methyl iodide nationally.

Concerned about the connection between exposure to chemicals and diseases such as asthma and cancer, Feinstein asked the EPA on Tuesday to "reconsider" its approval of methyl iodide, specifically citing the hazard it poses to field workers and pregnant women. Prior to this request, Feinstein wrote to EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson on July 15 saying that the agency's 2007 decision to approve the chemical was made "despite opposition by hundreds of leading scientists."

"Senator Feinstein's strong stand for the use of accurate, independent science in this decision is heartening. Maybe this time around science and public health will trump the interests of a multinational corporation," said Kathryn Gilje, Executive Director of Pesticide Action Network North America.

EPA announced in a letter to the nonprofit law firm Earthjustice received Tuesday that the agency intends to open a national public comment period on the pesticide's approval due to the "complexity of the issues raised and the public interest in methyl iodide." Earthjustice filed a legal petition on behalf of health, environmental and labor groups in March requesting that EPA cancel the approval of methyl iodide nationally.

The EPA's announcement acknowledges growing public opposition to methyl iodide and commits to review evidence that the agency underestimated the formidable public health risks of the pesticide in its 2007 decision.

"The EPA's job is to protect the health of consumers who eat produce and communities who live near fields, not the profits of pesticide companies," said Teresa DeAnda, President of the community group El Comité Para el Bienestar de Earlimart. "I hope they take this chance to do the right thing and ban methyl iodide."

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On July 15, the Washington State Department of Agriculture announced that methyl iodide will not be approved for use in the state. After reviewing science associated with the chemical, the department invited the pesticide manufacturer, Arysta LifeScience, to withdraw its application for registration. New York was the first state to decline to register methyl iodide, Washington is the second, and opponents hope California will be the third. Florida approved the chemical with additional use restrictions.

Methyl iodide is promoted by the largest privately-held pesticide company in the world, Arysta LifeScience. The Tokyo-based corporation has recently invested significant resources in lobbying and a communications campaign in California in order to secure registration in one of the most lucrative potential markets in the nation. If approved, methyl iodide would be used as a soil fumigant in the state's strawberry fields, where it would be applied as a gas at up to 125 lbs per acre. Communities adjacent to, and farmworkers who work in the strawberry fields where methyl iodide would be used have joined over 50 eminent scientists in a national effort to block registration of what has been characterized as "one of the most toxic chemicals on earth."*

*Characterization made during a June 17, 2010 California Senate Food & Agriculture Committee hearing by John Froines, PhD, chair of the California Department of Pesticide Regulation Scientific Review Committee on methyl iodide.

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