House Oversight Panel Investigating Controversial EPA Pesticide Approval

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The House Oversight & Government Reform Committee is investigating EPA's controversial decision to grant a one-year approval for the pesticide iodomethane, an inquiry that could bolster environmentalist efforts to overturn a decision which has already drawn high-profile criticism from prominent scientists, activists and others.

The meeting comes as activists submitted an Oct. 25 petition signed by many rural and public health environmental organizations formally calling on the agency to cancel the registration. The petition was also sent to Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA), who chairs the oversight committee, and Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-CA), who heads the Senate environment committee, among other lawmakers.

EPA and congressional sources say committee staff met with EPA pesticide officials during the week of Oct. 22 to discuss the agency's recent decision to approve use of the pesticide. Agency pesticide officials Oct. 5 granted a one-year approval of iodomethane, also called methyl iodide, as a replacement for the ozone-depleting soil fumigant methyl bromide, which EPA is phasing out under the Montreal Protocol.

Sources declined to provide details about the conversation between committee staff and EPA experts, but several sources say the meeting took place at the committee's request.

EPA approved the pesticide over the objections of more than 50 U.S. and international members of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), including five Nobel Laureates in chemistry, who cited potential health risks from the chemical’s use as a pesticide. The chemists submitted a letter to EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson Sept. 24 “to urgently request your assistance in preventing” the chemical's registration.

Despite the request, EPA officials approved the registration. During an Oct. 5 conference call, Assistant Administrator for the Office of Prevention, Pesticides & Toxic Substances James Gulliford said the agency has performed an “exhaustive review” of the chemical and noted that the registration comes with “tough restrictions,” including a requirement that workers and bystanders stay outside a buffer zone for 48 hours after iodomethane is applied.

However, the approval has rankled environmentalists and academic experts, who have pointed to a variety of risks associated with the substance. The environmental group Pesticide Action Network (PAN) submitted the Oct. 25 petition with over 10,000 signatories -- including the United Farmworkers of America, Farmworker Justice Fund and several other rural and public health activist groups -- calling on EPA “to immediately revoke this registration, before farmworkers and families in rural communities are exposed to a pesticide known to cause cancer, thyroid problems, neurotoxicity and miscarriages, among other effects.” The petition says Congress “should take a long hard look at the way [EPA] makes decisions about pesticides, since this decision is clearly not based on the best science.”

In its recent letter the NAS group echoed many of those concerns, urging EPA “to do whatever is possible to prevent this chemical from ever becoming a registered pesticide” because it poses “extraordinarily well-known cancer hazards.” The letter said that, in addition to iodomethane’s cancer risks, EPA’s own evaluation of the
chemical also indicates that it can cause “thyroid toxicity, permanent neurological damage, and fetal losses in experimental animals.”

Gulliford argued on the conference call that mitigation measures included in the approval are sufficient to prevent negative environmental or human health impacts.

In the agency's Oct. 5 letter responding to the NAS group, EPA said it will make decisions on risk mitigation measures for soil fumigants “as a group” after reviewing public comments on a draft revised risk assessment of several other fumigants issued earlier this year. EPA says it may then re-examine whether further controls are needed for iodomethane “to ensure consistency with other fumigants.” The letter explains that the agency issued only a one-year registration for iodomethane in order to account for the possibility of re-examining the chemical’s risk mitigation measures at a later time. -- Adam Sarva