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For immediate release: Thursday, February 11, 2010

NEWS RELEASE

World-Class Scientific Panel Strongly Criticizes Highly Toxic, Potential Strawberry Pesticide

Decision on potent carcinogen and water contaminant expected soon

SACRAMENTO, CA—An external Scientific Panel convened by state agencies to evaluate the risks of a potential new strawberry pesticide released its findings today outlining serious concerns for rural residents and farm workers if the chemical were approved for widespread use in California's fields. Under pressure from methyl iodide manufacturer Arysta LifeScience Corporation, the California Department of Pesticide Regulation's Director Mary Ann Warmerdam is expected to make a decision on whether or not to register the chemical—which would be one of the most toxic pesticides on the market—in the coming weeks.

“The science is in. Using methyl iodide in the fields would be a ticking time bomb,” said Dr. Susan Kegley, Consulting Scientist with Pesticide Action Network North America. “If the Department of Pesticide Regulation approves methyl iodide, we can expect to see increased numbers of late-term miscarriages for women who live or work near methyl iodide applications, increased thyroid disease, and more cancers.”

The Scientific Review Committee noted in their report: “Based on the data available, we know that methyl iodide is a highly toxic chemical and we expect that any anticipated scenario for the agricultural or structural fumigation use of this agent would result in exposures to a large number of the public and thus would have a significant adverse impact on the public health. Due to the potent toxicity of methyl iodide, its transport in and ultimate fate in the environment, adequate control of human exposure would be difficult, if not impossible.”

“The clear scientific consensus of the independent expert panel carries great weight. It would be a mistake to ignore the science, since the people of California would pay the price with their health,” commented Dr. Gina Solomon, Senior Scientist, Natural Resources Defense Council.

The pesticide, methyl iodide, has raised concerns from scientists across the country, including five Nobel Laureates in Chemistry, who were “astonished” that a chemical posing such high risks to human health would be considered for use in agriculture. Methyl iodide is so reliably carcinogenic that it's used to induce cancer in the lab. It is currently listed on California's Proposition 65 list of “chemicals known to cause cancer.” The chemical also has high potential to contaminate groundwater.

Methyl iodide poses the most direct risks to farm workers and neighboring communities because of the volume that could be applied to fields and its tendency to drift off site. The chemical could be applied to California's strawberry fields at rates up to 175 lbs per acre, millions of pounds total, on the over 38,000 acres in strawberry production.

"It's clear that there's no possible way to use methyl iodide safely in California's fields," said Anne Katten, Pesticide and Work Safety Specialist at California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation. "It's the responsibility of California's regulators to reject Arysta's request to approve this chemical that would pose serious health risks to untold numbers of people across the state."

Arysta, the largest privately held agrichemical company in the world, has launched a concerted campaign to influence California regulators' decision on the chemical. California would be the biggest market in the country.

Based on results of California's external scientific review, which found "in each and every instance where DPR findings differed from the USEPA risk assessment it was attributable to a more insightful and scientific approach having been undertaken by the DPR." U.S. EPA should clearly reconsider their decision to allow the chemical to be used in other states. According to U.S. EPA, methyl iodide is only being used in twelve states. In New York, Arysta pulled its request to register the chemical because the state asked tough questions on health and environmental impacts – and because the New York market for the chemical is small. Like California, Washington State is also in the process of reviewing the risks of methyl iodide to determine if it should be permitted for use in the state.

Farmers and researchers gathered on Monday at a Senate Food & Agriculture Committee hearing convened by the committee Chair, Senator Dean Florez, to testify about the availability of non-fumigant alternatives to methyl iodide.

"I've been growing strawberries without using pesticides in California for 25 years," said Jim Cochran, owner of Swanton Berry Farm in Davenport, California. "It's certainly possible to grow commercially-viable and ecologically sound strawberry crops without using methyl iodide or any other chemical pesticides."

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Available for interviews:

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Resources:

Department of Pesticide Regulation's website with External Scientific Panel's Report:
<http://www.cdpr.ca.gov/docs/risk/methyliodide.htm>

Pesticide Action Network information on methyl iodide, including legislator letter:
<http://www.panna.org/fumigants/mei>

Pesticide Action Network information on fumigant pesticides: <http://www.panna.org/fumigants>

Letter from National Academy of Sciences members to US EPA:
http://www.epa.gov/pesticides/factsheets/iodomethane_letter.pdf

Methyl Iodide Facts

• Methyl Iodide is a soil fumigant

Fumigant pesticides are volatile, drift-prone chemicals injected into the soil at application rates of 50-400 pounds per acre. The maximum application rate for methyl iodide is 175 pounds per acre.

• Methyl iodide can cause cancer and other very serious illnesses

The state of California lists methyl iodide as a carcinogen under Proposition 65. Methyl iodide reacts rapidly with DNA to cause mutations, and the presence of iodine in methyl iodide results in particularly damaging levels being sequestered in the thyroid gland, causing cancers of the thyroid in laboratory animals.

In addition to the thyroid tumors observed in the study, large and significant changes were observed in thyroid hormone levels, which are intimately tied to metabolic disorders, immune function, and developmental disorders of the fetus, leading to miscarriages in laboratory animals. Other animal studies demonstrate that exposure to methyl iodide causes respiratory tract lesions and neurological effects.

• Methyl iodide is a threat to state groundwater supplies

In California, thousands of drinking water wells are already contaminated with the banned, extremely toxic fumigants DBCP and EDB. Use of methyl iodide would place our scarce water resources at risk of further contamination. Since methyl iodide is very soluble in water, there is a real danger of leaching to ground water, especially if it rains or irrigation occurs soon after fumigation tarps are removed. In a recently published study, scientists from USDA and UC Riverside concluded that methyl iodide may pose a risk of groundwater contamination in vulnerable areas.

• Growers do not need methyl iodide

The rush to register methyl iodide has been rationalized by the upcoming withdrawal of methyl bromide from the agricultural market, as mandated by the Montreal Protocol, an international treaty to phase out production and use of ozone-depleting substances. Yet prior to the proposed substitution of methyl iodide, conventional growers were exploring a variety of non-fumigant methods for controlling soil pests.

Organic and pesticide-free farmers have been successfully managing soil pathogens and soil fertility with agroecological practices such as crop rotation, composting, and the application of broccoli and mustard residues.

• DPR's draft risk assessment finds methyl iodide highly toxic

California's Department of Pesticide Regulation has held off registration and has completed a draft risk assessment that reviews methyl iodide's toxicity and environmental hazards and scheduled an outside peer review of this work. The draft risk assessment prepared by CDPR details serious health risks of methyl iodide exposure.

DPR toxicologists explain that iodide is concentrated in the mammary gland, so nursing infants would receive excess iodide exposure through breast milk if their mothers were exposed to methyl iodide. The toxicologists conclude that methyl iodide can upset maternal and fetal thyroid function. The chemical causes thyroid tumors in laboratory animals, as well as miscarriages. DPR conclude that "... air concentrations estimated for human exposure to MeI under the proposed use conditions will result in significant risks for workers and the general population, with anticipated exposures up to 3,000 times the acceptable dose for some proposed soil fumigation use scenarios."