

Climate Strategies Can't Ignore Pesticides

by Asha Sharma, Organizing Co-Director

After joining PAN last spring, I spent a lot of time getting up to speed on the policy landscape in California. I initially felt overwhelmed by the state's many regulatory strategies and plans to reduce or adapt to climate change. However, I quickly realized one glaring oversight — every single strategy excludes concrete reductions in chemical pesticide use.

Without decreasing pesticide dependency and investing in ecological pest management, California will fail to meet its climate goals — and the impacts of climate change and pesticide use will continue to fall disproportionately on people of color.

Research shows that climate change will most likely result in increased pesticide use in agriculture, both because of increased pest and disease pressures, and because pesticides will become less effective. This will increase exposure for rural communities and farmworkers — unless we begin to support and incentivize other forms of pest management.

Long-term exposure to pesticides can already cause a host of illnesses and diseases, from neurological disease to cancer. Higher temperatures under climate change will mean higher environmental toxicity and pesticide volatilization (when a liquid or solid turns into a gas), a primary source of pesticide drift. The compounded effects of increased pesticide use with increased volatilization could have disastrous health impacts — with people of color most affected.

Research has found that pesticide exposure occurs mainly along racial lines in California, with 95% of agricultural pesticide use taking place in communities with the highest proportion of residents of color.

Farmworkers in particular are on the frontlines of pesticide exposure, and the expected increases in pesticide use will add to other harmful effects from climate change, like extreme heat. When applying pesticides, farmworkers typically wear personal protective equipment like long sleeves, which increases risk from heat-related illnesses as temperatures rise because of climate change.

And...pesticides worsen climate change

In a particularly destructive cycle, not only is climate change likely to increase pesticide use, pesticides contribute to climate change as well. Many chemical pesticides release greenhouse gas emissions during their production, storage, transportation and application. Meanwhile, alternative agriculture systems that limit chemical pesticide use, like organic farming, can increase carbon stored in soils.

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Going to Court — and Winning

Lawsuits have been an important tool in PAN’s advocacy toolbox for years. Though we don’t highlight it much, legal action is often part of our campaigns. Here’s a quick look “under the hood” at this important strategy.

We don’t have lawyers on staff, but we partner with organizations that do — like Center for Food Safety (CFS), Natural Resources Defense Council and Earthjustice — to hold public agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) accountable to their mission. PAN members who’ve been harmed by pesticides provide “standing” in a case.

Chlorpyrifos is a case in point, as legal strategies were key to the recent national victory banning the brain-harming insecticide on food crops.

From the original legal petition back in 2007 to last spring’s court order requiring EPA to take action, our lawyers at Earthjustice were on the case. They filed multiple complaints when the agency failed to respond for years, resulting in a judge reprimanding EPA for “egregious delay.” They sued again when then EPA leader Scott Pruitt — with zero justification — derailed a planned federal ban of the chemical in early 2017.

A court order alone, however, is never enough. As the chlorpyrifos case clearly showed, winning change also takes persistent organizing, grassroots science, and lifting up stories of those most harmed by pesticides.

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Industry always pushes back

Legal cases can also shine light on industry’s efforts to keep their products on the market at any cost, from aggressive media campaigns (aka “PR spin”) to lobbying agency officials. In the chlorpyrifos case, the spotlight was on EPA’s behind-closed-doors meetings with Dow Chemical (now Corteva) just weeks before the agency’s 2017 about-face on the national ban.

And then there’s dicamba. When the court ruled in our favor in June 2020, the judge ordered EPA to immediately stop use of this volatile herbicide that had already damaged millions of acres of crops across the country. The agency instead found an industry-friendly loophole and allowed continued use through the

season — and then reapproved use of a “reformulated” version of the antiquated chemical for five more years.

We immediately sued again, with our CFS lawyers arguing persuasively that EPA had rushed dicamba’s approval without ever adequately evaluating its harms. In December 2021, EPA finally acknowledged that the chemical should never have been allowed on the market, and set the process in motion (though still too slowly!) to withdraw registration.

Highlighting the need for deeper change

We know we won’t win food system transformation one chemical at a time. That’s why we use these lawsuits to tell a broader story of the problems pesticides cause, and the urgent need for structural change.

For chlorpyrifos, this meant highlighting the fact that pesticides can harm children’s developing brains, and put farmworkers at risk every day. We’re now pressing EPA and Congress to ban all chlorpyrifos-like organophosphate pesticides.

In the case of dicamba, our suit helped reveal the staggering financial damage caused by drifting herbicides, particularly for farmers in the Midwest and South. The case also shows just how dangerous industry’s pesticide treadmill —

driven by genetically engineered (GE) seeds — can be. As Iowa farmer and PAN Communications Associate Rob Faux notes:

When I signed up to be a farmer, I was perfectly willing to make adjustments to address weather, climate, pests, weeds and even consumer demand. I did not sign up to spend my time and energy trying to protect my farm and my crops from chemical trespass.

It shouldn’t take legal action to force our public agencies to protect public health, farmer livelihoods and the environment — but all too often, it does. That’s why PAN continues to pursue this important strategy, with current cases in motion to protect the Kikīaola Harbor in Hawai‘i from contamination, challenge EPA’s approval of glyphosate, contest the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s faulty framework for making decisions on GE crops, and more. Onward! 🌱

TAKE ACTION: Urge your Senators to co-sponsor the Protect America’s Children from Pesticides Act (PACTPA) today! bit.ly/ActPACTPA



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Toxic Taters Fights for Clean Water in Minnesota

Since 2006, PAN has been working with a grassroots coalition of farmers, rural residents, and White Earth tribal members to advocate for the victims of health impacts from pesticide drift and contaminated water in the potato-growing areas of central and north-central Minnesota.

This coalition is called Toxic Taters, and after a couple of years navigating membership changes and pandemic realities, they are back in full force with new leadership and an important clean water project.

Meet Tanya RedRoad

In early 2021, Tanya RedRoad stepped into the role of coordinator for the Toxic Taters Coalition. Tanya is a descendant of the Little Shell Chippewa Tribe and Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, a mother and grandmother. She came to this position with experience in nursing and personal home care, Indian education, and with various nonprofit roles that emphasize community health and nurturing relationships with the land and water.

Tanya and the coalition have been busy over the past year, re-focusing and gearing up for the work ahead:

As I enter the role of Toxic Taters Coordinator, I hope to stand with those before me who have been working so diligently on these issues, and help them challenge our local and state policies around pesticides and corporate agriculture to ensure safer food and water for our communities.

We plan to keep community education at the forefront of our work, conduct research on local agricultural contamination including water testing, share stories to understand the serious impacts of pesticide drift, and continue to take action and stand up for our health.

Clean water for all Minnesotans

Toxic Taters has been collaborating with White Earth Land Recovery Project, Minnesota Well Owners Organization, and Northern Water Alliance to provide free water testing clinics in north-central Minnesota, screening for nitrates, chloride, and other contaminants. This work is especially important in rural and farming communities that are heavily exposed to pesticides — like those surrounded by potato fields owned by Ronald D. Offutt, or RDO, the largest potato grower in the world and one of McDonald's leading suppliers.



Toxic Taters, White Earth Land Recovery Project, Northern Water Alliance, and Minnesota Well Owners Organization have teamed up to provide free water testing clinics in north-central Minnesota.

Water testing is important for communities that source their water from wells, as unlike municipal water sources, private wells aren't closely regulated for contaminant testing and maintenance. After the first round of free clinics, results showed that many families are using unsafe water. The second round of free clinics will take place this spring. If you're located in the area, feel free to connect with Tanya for more information at tatercoordinator@gmail.com.

Supporting the community

In addition to providing testing, Toxic Taters and partners want to support community members when their test results show dangerous chemical levels. Immediate action is often needed, and many folks are unable to afford the costs of water service or filtration. Minnesota's state government should be doing far more to protect and provide access to clean water for all. But until then, the coalition has launched the Clean Water is a Right fund to support community members with emergency clean water, filtration systems and other water services. —

If you're able, please consider supporting this work with a donation of any size: bit.ly/MNCleanWater

Sustain PAN's Work Give Monthly

When you join PAN as a Sustainer, you become part of a vital group that donates each month to fund grassroots science, collaboration with frontline communities, and policy change. We rely on consistent support from Sustainers to work towards a healthy, fair and resilient system of food and farming.

Become a Sustainer today by going to www.panna.org/give-monthly.



ABOUT PAN PAN works to create a just, thriving food system, working with those on the frontlines to tackle the pesticide problem — and reclaim the future of food and farming. One of five regional centers worldwide, PAN North America links local and international consumer, labor, health, environment and agriculture groups into an international citizens' action network. Together, we challenge the global proliferation of pesticides, defend basic rights to health and environmental quality, and work to ensure the transition to a just and viable food system.

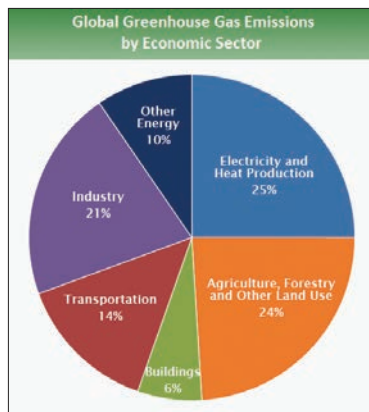
Given how climate change will likely result in increased pesticide use and exposure, and how pesticide use can increase greenhouse gas emissions, we urgently need to reduce pesticide dependency. It's time to incentivize ecological pest management and climate-friendly, socially just agricultural systems like agroecology, which focus on mimicking natural ecosystems and building soil health and crop resilience to prevent the need for pest control measures in the first place.

Climate strategies leave out pesticide reduction targets

Neither of the two primary overarching climate strategies in California — the California Air Resources Board's Scoping Plan, and the California Natural Resources Agency's Climate Adaptation Strategy — currently include chemical pesticide reduction targets or goals.

This needs to change. Specific reduction targets would help guide meaningful investments in incentives for farmers experimenting with alternative crop and pest management practices, and expansion of technical assistance providers who specialize in ecological pest management and agroecology.

Additionally, the California Department of Food and Agriculture's Healthy Soils Program, meant to incentivize climate-friendly agriculture practices, leaves out any incentives for farmers to reduce pesticide use.



Experts estimate that industrial agriculture (orange) — with its heavy pesticide use — contributes nearly a quarter of greenhouse gas emissions. (2014 IPCC report)

To be successful, our climate strategies must acknowledge the power of shifting to alternative agricultural systems that reduce chemical dependency, like agroecology or diversified organic agriculture. A systems-level approach will have a much larger impact than current strategies that focus on oversimplified measures like changes to single farming practices, and reducing chemical pesticide use would finally begin to address the historical legacy of environmental racism and ecological disaster inherent in chemical-intensive agriculture. 🌱

Read Asha's full blog post at bit.ly/PesticidesClimate.

Denise O'Brien: Farmer, activist & longtime PAN supporter

Denise first encountered PAN in 1995 at the World Conference on Women in Beijing, where PAN experts hosted a workshop highlighting the aggressive corporate marketing of pesticides to women in Asia. "There was one ad that featured a white woman in a blue shirt, white cowgirl boots and hat with a lasso in her hand, poised to rein in a bottle of pesticide. I will never forget that racist ad."

Years after her introduction to PAN in Beijing, Denise and her husband Larry used PAN's Drift Catcher on their Iowa farm to monitor the air for chemicals when her neighbors sprayed their crops. They produce organic vegetables in western Iowa, and are "surrounded by

thousands of acres of genetically engineered corn and soy that rely heavily on pesticides." She appreciates PAN's science-based programs to educate the public about the negative effects of industrial agribusiness, and the organization's "outstanding" collaborative advocacy for policies that protect people from these harms.

Through her involvement in local and state politics, Denise promotes a vision of the future where drinking water is safe, food is safe, and where "we can all celebrate nature's glorious beauty." She served on PAN's Board for many years, and continues to support our work with monthly donations.

I support PAN because I want my children and grandchildren to live free from the fear of chemical contamination that impacts our lives today.

Denise O'Brien



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