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Methyl Madness

Methyl bromide, the ozone-depleting pesticide of choice for strawberry farmers, could soon be usurped. Trouble is the newcomer, methyl iodide, might be even worse.

By Kat Lynch

IF GOV. Schwarzenegger caves to political pressure, a new pesticide called methyl iodide could replace methyl bromide as the primary pest-fighter used by strawberry farmers. This might come as some relief to environmentalists who've been pushing the phaseout of the ozone-depleting methyl bromide. But there's a catch: its would-be replacement is a highly volatile carcinogen, or cancer-causing agent. And activists fear that California will see a replay of the 2007 Bush administration decision to approve methyl iodide before hearing what the scientific community said first.

According to activists, the pesticide industry has been pressuring the governor to speed up the approval process so the new pesticide will be available for the next fumigation cycle, which starts in August. Sources expect the governor to make a decision within a few weeks. The fumigant up for approval is Midas, the commercial form of methyl iodide and chloropicrin produced by the company Arysta.

"They are circumventing the scientific process," says Dr. Susan Kegley, a consulting chemist for the Pesticide Action Network, explaining that while the state's Department of Pesticide Regulation ordinarily runs its own tests before approval, this time the decision might be made before the Scientific Review Panel reviews the department's risk assessment draft. Kegley says the environmental costs associated with methyl iodide are largely unknown; the EPA has yet to do an environmental study. "The effect that methyl iodide has on field mice and birds that don't get out of the way is yet to be determined," she says.

Methyl iodide's health effects are better understood--and they're not good. The draft of the DPR's risk assessment reports in bureaucratese that methyl iodide increases the incidence of cancer, miscarriages and thyroid disease. Kegley, meanwhile, observes that scientists use the utmost care when testing it. "Methyl iodide is so toxic that scientists working with it in the laboratory take extreme caution when handling it, using a ventilation hood, gloves and special equipment for transferring it so it does not escape to the air," she says, adding that workers would breathe 100 times the dose found acceptable by state law--and without the protection a lab provides.

However, it is not just the fieldworkers' health that is at stake. People in surrounding areas would receive amounts higher than the DPR's acceptable dose, says Kegley, noting that federal scientists, when they accepted the pesticide, didn't account for the prevailing winds throughout much of California. "They did not take into serious consideration the people living downwind of the areas," she says. Finally, even though methyl iodide is placed in the soil, it could leach into the groundwater.

To Paul Towers, state director of Pesticide Watch, it's a matter of leaping from the frying pan into the fire. "As a society we should collectively be moving toward safer practices. New York has

taken the lead and rejected methyl iodide as a pesticide," he says. "In theory, only the applicators are exposed to pesticides. [But] methyl iodide poses even more potential threats than methyl bromide."

To most of us, there would be little discernible difference between the strawberry farmers of Santa Cruz County using methyl bromide and methyl iodide. From the road, passers-by would see the same tarps over the fields that are used for methyl bromide fumigation. The two products work in much the same way. Brett Melone, executive director of Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association (ALBA), explains how. "Methyl iodide kills everything in the soil before planting begins," he says, adding that all soil fumigants sterilize the planting area, killing everything from fungi to nematodes.

He also says there are safer ways to fight pests and disease. "It's all about managing the soil," he says. "More to the point, it is entirely unnecessary, as sustainable and organic farming systems are available now. ALBA has trained hundreds of farmers to grow food--including strawberries--without chemicals in Monterey, Santa Cruz and San Benito counties. Most of the farmers ALBA works with are former farmworkers seeking a healthier environment to grow food."

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