

Activists Seek to Derail Agriculture

By ACSH Staff — April 2, 2010

A lawsuit in the "judicial hellhole" that is Madison County, Ill., against the makers of the world's most widely used herbicide threatens to undermine our way of evaluating risks in this country. If the lawyers -- and the anti-chemical, anti-business activists -- get their way, American agriculture will be forced back to practices of the pre-industrial age. And that will be only the first step in the "environmentalist" agenda to roll back progress.

If you think that's an exaggeration, think again. A finding against Syngenta, which manufactures atrazine, would set a very dangerous precedent, with repercussions for farmers and anyone who enjoys their bounty. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), unfortunately, has now loaned its weight to the activists' Luddite effort to restrict or ban a number of safe and useful agricultural chemicals in common use -- with atrazine, the most effective weed-killer available, only one of the targets.

Atrazine has been widely used for over fifty years and is credited with dramatically increasing yields of corn and sugar cane (among other crops) while reducing the need for other, cruder weed-killers, saving embattled farmers precious money. There has never been a single instance of adverse health effects in humans reliably attributed to exposure to atrazine when used as licensed.

Nevertheless, lawyers specializing in working with anti-business activists recruited a few local water systems to sue Syngenta in Illinois beginning in 2004, alleging that there was too much atrazine in their drinking water. The litigants demanded expensive water filtration systems, paid for by the chemical company. This, despite the fact that the monitored atrazine levels, including some occasional spikes, did not violate EPA guidelines for average concentrations. They were permissible and posed no health risk for anyone drinking the water.

However, the plaintiffs do not accept even the hyper-stringent guidelines of the EPA and asked the court to accept only a "zero tolerance" standard for chemical contaminants. Now, perhaps sensing increasing anti-chemical sentiment in Washington, the same groups have filed a similar lawsuit in federal court. The water system litigants plead for funding for expensive filtration systems to filter atrazine from their drinking water.

If, as the plaintiffs allege, their only concern were atrazine, they could stop worrying about drinking-water filtration and rest easy. However, if this case is upheld, lawyers and activists will have manipulated scientifically unsophisticated juries into rejecting the basic toxicological precept that "the dose makes the poison." Everything is toxic at some level but harmless in small enough amounts. Since scientists can now detect substances at parts per trillion, an amount smaller than a drop in an Olympic-sized pool, and thus can find at least some trace of almost any chemical in almost any location, a zero tolerance approach would essentially bar the use of any chemical pesticide (or even fertilizer) in American agriculture.

This anti-atrazine litigation has the potential to reverse the "Green Revolution" in agro-science that has helped feed the world for decades.

In attempting to justify their trumped-up "health" case, the activists and their lawyers refer repeatedly to a few experimental results showing harm to frogs. But most of the studies they point to have originated in the lab of one particular anti-atrazine crusader, with almost none of those findings verifiable in other labs. Even the hyper-vigilant EPA re-approved atrazine in 2006.

True, the new, more cautious team now running the EPA has decided to yet again re-assess atrazine -- but this new review was so blatantly unnecessary that the EPA's own administrator, Lisa Jackson, could not with a straight face call it a health issue. Rather, the review was prompted by "consumer concerns," she said. Those concerns are based on anti-chemical hysteria and litigation-supporting reports. Catering to them only perpetuates public fear.

The E.U. did indeed ban atrazine, not over any real health concern, but based on the unscientific "precautionary principle." There was "not enough information to prove its safety," according to the E.U. committee. In fact, no substance can be proved completely safe, as too much of anything can be hazardous -- including (atrazine-free) distilled water and table salt. Fortunately, we do not allow the precautionary principle to rule the day with every substance. If we did, we'd have to throw away aspirin and just about anything else that is not 100% safe. We depend on realistic, exposure-based risk assessment and reasonable risk-benefit balance.

If the plaintiffs get their way, we'll move away from that sort of rationality and the technological progress that has gone with it. This litigation is frivolous yet dangerous, for if zero tolerance of any contaminant in water becomes the standard, in defiance of all scientific precepts of dose-response, agriculture will stop its centuries-long trend toward greater safety and efficiency and take a colossal leap backward.

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