Scientists object to federal order on pesticide testing

New tests on all 67 chemicals are not needed if there is data from past studies by pesticide makers, the directive says. Opponents say the firms could selectively submit data portraying products as safe.

By Alexander C. Hart

October 17, 2009

Reporting from Washington

A program to test the effect of pesticides on the human hormonal system will be compromised by an Office of Management and Budget order allowing data from past studies by pesticide companies to substitute for new studies, according to some scientists involved in developing the new program.

The OMB directive requires the Environmental Protection Agency to accept "to the greatest extent possible" existing toxicity data on pesticides in lieu of conducting new tests on the 67 chemicals selected for investigation.

"I would view it as a smart, good government way of not making people do costly and duplicative tests," said a senior OMB official, who noted that the tests can cost up to $1 million.

But the order has angered some scientists, who contend that it would allow the pesticide makers to selectively submit outdated studies that show the pesticides are safe.

The pesticides should undergo the new tests, they say.

"What the OMB is asking the [EPA] to do is to accept all the old data from pesticide manufacturers defending the safety of their products," said Theo Colborn, a scientist who served on panels that designed the testing program.

Peter deFur, an environmental scientist and another panel member, said the OMB directive is a capitulation to industry groups.

Pesticide makers "have done everything they could to make sure that EPA wasn't going to put this program in place," he said.
"OMB is telling three federal advisory committees and dozens of scientists that they don't know what they're talking about," he said. "It's either hubris or ignorance."

The testing program was ordered 13 years ago by Congress. It was supposed to be up and running by 1999 but is only now set to begin.

Industry officials said the OMB order would help speed up the program. "These positive measures will greatly facilitate the testing process," Jay Vroom, president of the pesticide trade group CropLife America, said in a statement.

The OMB, which oversees administration regulatory policies, defended its directive, noting that the EPA's program already contained provisions allowing pesticide companies to submit existing data.

"A lot of the concerns were expressed from a lack of understanding about process and from a lack of understanding about the intricacies of the federal government," OMB spokesman Tom Gavin said.

"Where data didn't exist or wasn't applicable, we've given the agency the full authority it needs to get the information," he said.

A senior scientist involved in the creation of the testing program, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said it was common practice for the EPA to look at existing data when making regulatory decisions.

"I get data. I look at it. If it's junk, I tell them," the scientist said, adding that agency scientists can effectively separate good data from bad.

alex.hart@latimes.com

Copyright © 2009, The Los Angeles Times