Growing concern in the water

Alarmed by latest research, the Obama administration is conducting a broad review of toxic weed killer atrazine that could lead to tighter restrictions.

Despite growing health concerns about atrazine, an agricultural weedkiller sprayed on farm fields across the Midwest, most drinking water is tested for the chemical only four times a year - so rarely that worrisome spikes of the chemical likely go undetected.

High levels of the herbicide can linger in tap water during the growing season, according to more frequent tests in some agricultural communities.

Spread heaviest on cornfields, atrazine is one of the most commonly detected contaminants in drinking water. Studies have found that exposure to small amounts of the chemical can turn male frogs into females and might be more harmful to humans than once thought.

Manufacturers say their own research proves the chemical is safe. But alarmed by other studies, the Obama administration is conducting a broad review that could lead to tighter restrictions. It is also mulling changes in laws that require water utilities to test for atrazine just once a quarter or, in some cases, once a year.

"There always have been a lot of questions about atrazine, and we want to make sure the agency’s regulatory posture is consistent with the science about possible health effects," said Steve Owens, the

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the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, found that male frogs raised in atrazine-tainted water often showed signs of "feminization," with lower testosterone levels and decreased fertility. Some were chemically castrated; others grew female sex organs.

Syngenta says much of the independent research on atrazine is flawed. Company-financed studies, Pastoor said, have found atrazine doesn't harm frogs or humans. He said the EPA, under guidelines developed during the Bush administration, considers one-day exposures of up to 297 parts per billion safe for people.

Removing atrazine from drinking water can be expensive. Last year, 44 water systems in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Mississippi and Ohio filed a federal lawsuit seeking reimbursement from Syngenta and other manufacturers. Flora, population 5,086, recently started pumping water from a $27 million cooperative treatment plant more than 60 miles away rather than draw water from an aging local plant.

Some farm groups say there is enough evidence to vouch for the safety of atrazine. Banning it would raise costs for farmers and cut corn yields, supporters say. Yet that view isn't universal. Several states, including Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin, prohibit atrazine spraying in some areas prone to groundwater contamination. The Iowa Farmers Union supports tougher limits on atrazine for the same reason.

John Kiefner still uses atrazine on the 500 acres he farms near Manhattan in southern Will County. However, he said he uses much smaller concentrations than he did years ago, relies on no-till practices to curb soil erosion and runoff, and plants grass buffers along drainage ditches to filter chemical residue. "We like to have a full arsenal of weedkillers," Kiefner said. "If (atrazine) stays in the field, it's not going into the water."

A few miles away, Bill Heintz said he stopped using atrazine a decade ago. Alternative chemicals, he said, have worked just as well at controlling weeds on the 100 acres he farms near Peotone.

"Even 10 years ago, it sounded like something to steer away from," he said.

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"The more frequent tests are done outside the EPA's official monitoring program and don't count when regulators consider whether communities meet the legal limit for atrazine."

The regulator didn't say "Government Says", so the results are ignored. I can see the EPA requiring certain tests or even specifying certain testing companies to perform them, but ignoring the results because of when they are performed seems, well, negligent.

fx10 (04/19/2010, 1:30 PM )

ANYONE can do this simple test: walk through your neighborhood and find out if your neighbors have sprayed their lawn simply by SMELLING the air around their lawn. Yup. IT STINKS. NOW IMAGINE THAT IN YOUR SYSTEM.

zredfox (04/18/2010, 7:15 PM )

Austinhill---its true that atrazine is one of the world's most studied chemicals. Also interesting that the independent science conducted in recent years on the pesticide almost uniformly points to a consistent and troubling array of issues that has somehow not popped up in the research funded by Syngenta---the maker of atrazine. And while it is true that the science doesn't directly implicate atrazine for causing
cancer, there is VERY strong data that points to atrazine playing a synergistic role making other carcinogens in the environment more virulent.

And as far as the larger human impacts, sure, there are no lab tests on humans that can prove direct impacts. We don't do that sort of direct human testing—unless of course you count just letting it persist in the environment to impact millions of Americans as we do now. The epidemiology will have a difficult time pointing to direct cause because this stuff is so prevalent in the environment. It is tough to tease it out from other factors. But there is a large and growing body of science that points very strongly to developmental impacts on children's nervous and reproductive systems from this known endocrine disruptor. To imply otherwise is disingenuous.

jmogs (04/18/2010, 7:09 PM)