



## Some fear that EPA is going too far in regulating pesticides

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WASHINGTON — Barry Bushue often uses pesticides on his 70-acre farm east of Portland, Ore., where he raises strawberries, raspberries, tomatoes and pumpkins.

"Managing for pests is constant and critical," Bushue, the president of the Oregon Farm Bureau, told Congress during a hearing this week.

Many farmers across the nation want to make sure that federal regulators don't make it more difficult to spread chemicals on their land.

On Capitol Hill, those farmers have found allies in Republicans and some Democrats who are working to ease the regulations and strip some power from the Environmental Protection Agency, which oversees the use of pesticides to control insects, diseases and weeds. Earlier this year, the House of Representatives passed legislation that would negate the need for additional permits when spraying for pests near bodies of water.

The back and forth speaks to broader tension between some Republicans and the Obama administration over environmental policy.

Environmental policy experts say the GOP opposition stems from concerns that the Democratic administration is enforcing regulations more strictly than the George W. Bush administration did. The pushback against the EPA also can be seen in the ongoing fight by lawmakers over greenhouse gas emissions. In April, the GOP-controlled House passed a measure that would bar the EPA from regulating greenhouse gases, a day after the Senate defeated the measure.

A group of Republican senators — led by Pat Roberts of Kansas and including Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, Saxby Chambliss of Georgia and Thad Cochran of Mississippi — recently sent a letter to Sen. Deborah Stabenow, D-Mich., the chairwoman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, calling on her to bring up the Senate version of the pesticide regulation bill.

"We write to address the continued regulatory overreach by the Environmental Protection Agency that is a growing concern of farmers, ranchers, foresters and agribusinesses throughout the nation," the Republican senators wrote. "Agriculture producers, forestry interests, public health officials, states, municipalities and other impacted stakeholders have told us they are in imminent need of certainty for what may be required of them in the near future. State and local officials have made clear that this is not merely a regulatory burden but could endanger public health as we enter mosquito season."

Efforts to rein in the EPA have run into serious opposition from environmentalists, who say that farmers and the lawmakers who represent them are trying to find ways around complying with the Clean Water Act.

"It's disingenuous," said Mae Wu, a staff attorney in the health and environment program at the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Agriculture experts worry that the heavy use of pesticides has led to water pollution so widespread that fish species have been killed off.

"All that farming in the corn and soybean belts, which have our heaviest total pesticides use, makes its way into the Mississippi River, flowing out right through New Orleans to the Gulf of Mexico, where we have a large dead zone," said John Reganold, a professor of soil science at Washington State University.

The debate stems from a 1990s court case in which the EPA was ordered to require permits for pesticide applications. After several rounds of appeals, the agency was granted an extension until October 2011 to implement the regulation.

A fight brewing on a parallel front is focused on the Endangered Species Act, which requires the EPA to consult with other federal agencies regarding any pesticide that could harm a protected species.

In January, the Center for Biological Diversity sued the EPA, alleging that it didn't adequately consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service in approving pesticides.

The lawsuit seeks federal protection for 214 endangered and threatened species, including the black-footed ferret, gray wolf, razorback sucker, Red Hills salamander and Alabama lampmussel.

The lawsuit is prompting alarm among farmers and key lawmakers.

It could eliminate 380 pesticides used in 49 states, said Washington state Republican U.S. Rep. Doc Hastings, the chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee.

With the issue in court, Hastings and 17 other House members sent a letter to the White House asking that the administration take more time in advancing any regulations.

"At a time when the economy is already struggling, these regulations would cost jobs and impose a significant blow on the ability for the economy to recover," they said in the letter.

The agency is getting heat from all sides. Some environmentalists say it's been far too lax in regulating pesticides and protecting the health of humans and animals.

"For decades, the EPA has turned a blind eye to the disastrous effects pesticides can have on some of America's rarest species," said Jeff Miller, conservation advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity.

The EPA defended its work at the House hearing this week.

Steven Bradbury, the director of the EPA's office of pesticide programs, told the Natural Resources Committee that the agency has a well-regarded program for evaluating pesticide safety.

"A typical new agricultural pesticide must undergo over 100 different tests to characterize its potential risks," Bradbury said.