

# CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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## Your Turn: An amphibian take on our atrazine nation

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It didn't exactly lead the nightly news reports last week when three of my colleagues submitted the largest petition ever filed targeting the protection of amphibians and reptiles in the U.S.

The 454-page document makes it clear why the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service should use the Endangered Species Act to protect 53 of our nation's most imperiled frogs, turtles, snakes, lizards and salamanders.

Still, why should you care? What could the dwindling health of amphibians and reptiles possibly have to do with your life and health?

Even when you tell people that scientists estimate that one in four of our amphibians and reptiles are in danger of going extinct, and that their rapid deterioration offers us a very accurate predictor of our own long-term health prospects, people have a hard time seeing the connection to their own daily lives.

That's never been a problem for me.

Living in the Bay Area, I'm a long way from Texas, where I grew up.

About the only thing the two places have in common are people,



This is a photo of Blanding's Turtle, courtesy of Maine.gov.

lots of us. I guess that's why, as a kid, I was so in love with a lonely ranch in the Texas Hill Country along a slow bend in the Medina River.

It was there in the gently rolling oak- and juniper-studded hills where I learned to appreciate the delicate balance of the natural world.

The fragile nature of those connections came rushing home for my father when he suddenly fell very ill.

After a hospital stay, doctors determined his sickness was brought on by the pesticides he was spraying on the ranch's pecan orchards. For me and my dad, the lessons of his battle for health would last a lifetime.

Dad went organic because of this life-changing illness. Long before it was fashionable, he swore off pesticides and herbicides, along the way creating an environmental awareness that would propel me toward a career focusing on protecting endangered wildlife from the billions of pounds of chemicals we spew into our air and waterways every year.

It's challenging work in a country where more than 18,000 pesticides are registered for use, including the best-seller atrazine, which has been banned in Europe since 2004 because of studies linking it to cancer and the disruption of critical hormones.

Despite all its challenges, the beauty of my work is this: If

we can make sure our air and water is clean enough for the survival of amphibians -- which, after tens of millions of years on Earth, are now dying off at thousands of times their historic rates -- then they're clean enough for us, too.

Despite their dismal plight, amphibians and reptiles make up less than 5 percent of wildlife on the endangered species list.

Worse yet, laws like the Clean Water Act that protect our waterways from pesticides are under attack in Congress where the chemical lobby is trying to insert a rider into an unrelated Farm Bill to exempt pesticides from federal oversight.

So for me, when my co-workers filed that groundbreaking petition, it was a huge news, not just for the critters needing protection -- including 19 right here in California -- but for all of us. Because I've understood from a very early age that we can't dump all our poisons onto the fragile environment and expect no repercussions.