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Despite Progress, Long Fight Ahead to Protect Rare Wildlife From Pesticide



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It's hardly news that many of the more than 18,000 pesticide products approved for use in this country have been linked to cancer and other severe health effects in humans. Indeed, more than one billion pounds of pesticides are dumped on the North American landscape every year. Some chemicals, known as endocrine disruptors, interfere with the natural hormones in our bodies that regulate reproduction, brain function and immune response, and may be linked to increased risk for developmental and reproductive problems in both humans and wildlife.

Despite the well-documented risks, the U.S. has continued to allow the widespread use of these chemicals, even while they've been banned in other countries.

The European Union, for example, has outlawed atrazine, a widely used weed-killer in the U.S. that is also a common contaminant of drinking water and may be linked to increased risk of birth defects in people, frogs and fish.

That chemicals remain in widespread use despite known risks reflects serious cracks in our regulatory system, which registers dozens of chemicals every year but requires near absolute certainty of harm before pulling any from the shelves.

Routinely overlooked are the effects on endangered species.

The Environmental Protection Agency, which is charged with protecting us and the environment from the risks of pesticide use, has failed to assess the impact of literally hundreds of pesticides on our nation's endangered species despite a clear legal requirement to do so.

That's why I spent a recent Friday in a federal district courtroom in San Francisco participating in the most comprehensive legal action ever brought under the Endangered Species Act to protect endangered animals from pesticides.

If we're successful, the EPA will be forced to do its legal duty and consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service over the impacts of dozens of pesticides on 119 endangered and threatened species throughout the United States -- including Florida panthers, California condors, piping plovers, black-footed ferrets, arroyo toads, Indiana bats and Alabama sturgeon. Documents from federal agencies, as well as peer-reviewed scientific studies, show these species may be hurt by the pesticides at issue.

Regulation of these pesticides would be an important step to not only better protect these unique animals but also to better protect the environment, including our own drinking water.

A series of lawsuits brought by conservation groups, including the Center for Biological Diversity where I work as an attorney and biologist, forced the EPA to enact temporary restrictions on pesticide use for

the California red-legged frog and other species in California while it consulted with the Fish and Wildlife Service. These restrictions remain in place today.

Our litigation also prompted the Obama administration to adopt policy reforms recommended by the National Academy of Sciences aimed at gaps in the EPA's analysis of pesticide risks to the environment.

And just a few weeks ago the Center entered a nationwide settlement with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service requiring the agency to analyze impacts on endangered species across the country from five dangerous pesticides -- carbaryl, chlorpyrifos, diazinon, malathion and methomyl -- that have been found to be toxic to wildlife and may pose a health risk to humans. The analysis is likely to lead to permanent restrictions on some of the most harmful uses of these highly toxic pesticides.

Finally, last month the Fish and Wildlife Service announced that federal wildlife refuges would phase out use of a highly toxic and persistent class of pesticides known as neonicotinoids, which like atrazine have been banned by the European Union. These chemicals have been linked to the widespread collapse of bee colonies throughout the U.S. The Fish and Wildlife decision came after the Center for Food Safety and the Center for Biological Diversity petitioned the agency to address the issue.

These are important, long-overdue steps in the battle to reduce the exposure of all living things in this country to the obscene levels of pesticides released into the environment.

To be sure, there's much work left to be done in this arena. But it's exciting to finally see some substantial progress being made in reining in the pestilence of pesticides here in our corner of the only planet in the universe known to support life.