

Dangerous Pesticide's Hasty Approval Spurs Appeal

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It's used to fight a disease that kills Florida citrus trees, but the pesticide aldicarb also carries the risk of hurting farmworkers as well as children.



A detector canine called Szaboles works in a California citrus orchard searching for citrus greening disease, a bacteria that is spread by a tiny insect that feeds on citrus trees. (Tim R. Gottwald/USDA)

WASHINGTON (CN) — Environmental and public interest groups brought a [court challenge](#) Wednesday over last-minute rubber-stamping by the outgoing Trump administration of a dangerous pesticide used for Florida oranges.

Banned in more than 100 countries, aldicarb is an organic compound that the [World Health Organization has classified](#) as “extremely hazardous” as digestion or even exposure to the chemical can cause severe side effects in adults and impair brain development in young children.

Aldicarb had been the active ingredient in a Bayer pesticide called Temik, but mounting evidence over its dangers led the EPA and the company to a [termination agreement](#) in 2010 while President Barack Obama was in power. The deal brought use of the insecticide down from around [4 million pounds each year](#) since 1997 to under 100,000 after its phaseout. During the gradual phaseout, aldicarb got approved for use on a small subset of other crops, like cotton and sweet potatoes, in 2015.

Amid an enormous push from the citrus industry, however, the pesticide was once again approved in Florida during the waning days Trump administration.

“It was quicker than I’ve ever seen any pesticide approved,” said Nathan Donley, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity — which joined the Farmworker Association of Florida and Environmental Working Group in petitioning the D.C. Circuit on Wednesday to intervene.

“There’s clearly a lot of political influence here,” said Donley. “And we just see this as a complete and utter violation of the law.”

Aldicarb’s reapproval was official on Jan. 12, a week after a legally mandated public comment period that ended with more than 100 pages of risk assessment documents being finalized on Jan. 7.

While the pesticide is helpful to combat [citrus greening](#), a disease marked by small pests called psyllids, environmental groups call it a “quick fix” to the problem. Pesticides aren’t a long-term solution, as pests develop a resistance to treatment, requiring farmers to use harsher and more dangerous chemicals.

To the citrus industry, however, they can be a long-term solution so long as the pesticides are rotated before the psyllids [develop resistance](#).

“That’s why we need a full slate of different types of psyllid control and management because they do adapt and do become resistant — so you have to time and rotate the pesticides,” said Andrew Meadows, a spokesman for Florida Citrus Mutual, a group that represents the citrus industry.

Meadows said that psyllid control is only a subbenefit of aldicarb.

“The primary reason is it makes the trees more hearty, and it makes the roots more hearty. It’s another tool in the toolbox to keep trees healthy and yields up.”

Wednesday’s court challenge is also led by the Farmworker Association of Florida.

“They’re trying to throw anything they can — everything they can — at this citrus greening problem,” observed Jeannie Economos, who is pesticide safety and environmental health project coordinator at the association.

“Instead of throwing more pesticides at the problem, they need to look at ecological methods that strengthen the soil and strengthen the trees,” she continued.

Economos said the government has even recently approved a medically important antibiotic for use on citrus, posing serious harm to field workers.

Aldicarb can poison groundwater and the fruit itself, but the pesticide also harms farm workers. Citrus is still harvested by hand, and over 90% of citrus workers are H2A visa workers — who come from other countries, have little access to health care, and often don’t know the signs and symptoms of pesticide poisoning.

“They are the most vulnerable workers there are,” Economos said. “And they’re not just exposed to one kind of pesticide — they’re exposed to many. It’s insane to throw more pesticides at Florida where we have so many farm workers.”

Donley says the only avenue left for undoing the EPA’s reapproval is litigation, as the EPA pesticides office rarely backtracks after approval.

“The office does not do things unless forced to do it through law,” Donley said. “They are completely captured by the pesticides industry.”

A representative for the EPA declined to comment, citing agency policy on pending litigation.