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Widely banned pesticide allowed on Florida citrus crops sparks lawsuit

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(Reuters) - Farmers' and environmental groups sued the Environmental Protection Agency on Wednesday in Washington, D.C., appeals court over its approval of a chemical company's application to sell a widely-banned chemical in Florida to protect citrus crops from insect damage.

The Farmworker Association of Florida (FAF) and others say the agency's "lightning speed" approval during the Trump administration's waning days in January of the chemical aldicarb to treat Florida citrus crops violates the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act. The insecticide is banned in more than 100 countries, including China, while its use was mostly phased out in the United States a decade ago, the plaintiffs say.

EPA spokesman Ken Labbe said: "Because this is pending litigation, EPA has no additional information to share."

Aldicarb is one of only 36 pesticides the World Health Organization classifies as "extremely dangerous," the groups say. It is a neurotoxic substance, meaning it can affect the central nervous system, peripheral nerves or sensory organs.

The EPA authorized on Jan. 12 the use of aldicarb pesticides on 100,000 acres of Floridian orange and grapefruit orchards until 2023, saying it would help protect the citrus industry from a destructive insect called the Asian citrus psyllid.

The decision came in response to an application from North Carolina-based AgLogic Chemical Co LLC, which sells the pesticide, EPA's approval report appended to the complaint shows. AgLogic did not return requests for comments.

"This approval of aldicarb is just one more assault on the men and women who harvest our citrus crops in Florida, who do 'essential' work but who are treated as dispensable," said Jeannie Economos, who coordinates FAF's pesticide health program, in a statement.

The case is Farmworker Association of Florida et al. v. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Circuit Court for the D.C. Circuit, No. N/A.

For Farmworker Association of Florida et al.: Jonathan Evans, Center for Biological Diversity