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# Green, farm groups sue EPA over antibiotic use on crops

Marc Heller, E&E News reporterPublished: Thursday, March 25, 2021



An orange tree in Florida. Mike Cohen/Flickr

A coalition of environmental and farmworker groups sued EPA today to block use of the antibiotic streptomycin on citrus crops — a use that the groups said could result in more antibiotic resistance in humans.

The Center for Biological Diversity, Farmworker Justice and other groups said EPA during the final days of the Trump administration failed to adequately take human health risks into account when it approved the use of streptomycin.

In addition, they said, the environmental agency should have consulted with the Fish and Wildlife Service over potential risks to wildlife under the Endangered Species Act. They filed [suit](#) in the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

"Allowing lifesaving antibiotics to be used as pesticides is an unnecessary and dangerous practice that fuels a growing public health epidemic: antibiotic resistance," Allison Johnson, a sustainable food policy advocate at the Natural Resources Defense Council, which joined the lawsuit, said in a news release.

She added, "The EPA should be championing agricultural practices that protect farm workers and their communities, public health, and the environment — like building healthy soil and diversified farming — not increasing the use of dangerous pesticides."

In approving streptomycin, EPA said it helps suppress citrus greening disease, which has hobbled much of Florida's citrus industry. It's also effective against citrus canker disease, the agency said.

EPA also published a final **rule** on acceptable tolerances for streptomycin residue in February, on which the agency is taking public comment until April 12. In that document, EPA said it "concludes there is a reasonable certainty that no harm will result to the general population, or to infants and children, from aggregate exposure to streptomycin residues."

In related documents, EPA has said its reviews didn't find a threat to human health from use of streptomycin as a crop treatment. Although the antibiotic can cause health problems when injected into people in high doses — including hearing loss in children — the level of exposure from spraying crops is far less, the agency said.

"Because intramuscular/venous injection of streptomycin is an exposure route not relevant to pesticide use, effects occurring in association with that route of exposure are not relevant to use of streptomycin as a pesticide," EPA said in response to public comments from the environmental group Earthjustice on Jan. 11. "In addition, therapeutically-relevant doses are orders of magnitude higher than anticipated oral pesticide exposure."

EPA also said it collaborated with the Food and Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Department of Agriculture to evaluate potential antibiotic resistance.

The Center for Biological Diversity cited antibiotic resistance as a cause of rising cases of tuberculosis, adding that keeping the drugs effective is critical for human health.

"Leading global health officials are sounding the alarm about overuse of essential medicines like streptomycin, yet the EPA's pesticide office is recklessly blessing its use as a pesticide," said Nathan Donley, a senior scientist at the CBD.

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