

Pesticide Use Threatens Health in California

President Trump boasts about all the regulations that he has eliminated but he never mentions the important good that many of these rules were doing, as Dennis J Bernstein explains.

By Dennis J Bernstein

The battle to protect farmworkers and their families from dangerous pesticides has been going on for decades. But it has always been an uphill struggle because of the power and the money behind the mammoth petrochemical industry. In 2017, farmworkers, their families continued to be exposed to toxic sprays that drift into school zones and other populated areas.

While there have been some improvements and restrictions at the California state level, experts and activists in the field say not nearly enough is being done. And compounding the problem, EPA Director Scott Pruitt took swift action against new regulations that were about to be put into place under President Obama

Dr. Ann Lopez, Director of the Center for Farmworker Families, based in Felton, California, has taught courses in biology, environmental science, ecology and botany in the biology department at San José City College for many years. She is an independent researcher whose research addresses the human side of the binational migration circuit from the subsistence and small producer farms of west central Mexico to employment in California's corporate agribusiness.

Dr. Lopez has worked with over 33 farmworker families in the Salinas and Pajaro valleys. She has also studied 22 of their family farms in the west central Mexico countryside, and has received recognition and awards for her work.

Dr. Lopez, author of *The Farmworkers Journey*, was awarded the Human Agenda Ecological Sustainability Award in 2014 and the Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County, Inc. awarded her with the Community Game Changer Award in 2015.

I spoke to Dr. Lopez on Dec. 27, 2017 at her office in Felton, California.

Dennis Bernstein: We know that the struggle against pesticide use continues.

For so many years the farmworkers have been on the front line. What can we say at this point about these dangerous pesticides that are poisoning so many farmworkers and their families?

Ann Lopez: There has been some progress, especially pertaining to chlorpyrifos, a developmental neurotoxin. But we still have a long way to go.

I am very concerned about Roundup (glyphosate), which has been determined to be a Proposition 65 carcinogen. Monsanto does not have to label it as a carcinogen until well into 2018, which means that anyone who buys it thinking it is safe literally risks his or her life. Just mere exposure puts you at high risk, particularly for non-Hodgkin lymphoma and a variety of other horrible diseases, including blood cancers.

I personally know of three people who have died as a result of exposure, they believed, to Roundup. Yet this is sold in any hardware store as if it were nothing harmful. It speaks to the neoliberal economy, where profits are much more important than people or the environment.

Dennis Bernstein: There have been struggles around other chemicals and concern about spraying near schools.

Ann Lopez: Fortunately, the Pajaro Valley school district has gotten rid of Roundup spraying. This is one of my lead concerns because the entire public is put at risk with this and most people are unaware that this chemical can kill them!

Chlorpyrifos is a developmental neurotoxin derived from a nerve gas used in World War II which is primarily active on the brain and spinal cords of young children. This chemical was banned for residential use in 2000 but is still used in agriculture. So that is the front line for struggle today.

I have a PhD in environmental science and I have never read of a worse case of environmental racism than what I have studied in the Salinas Valley. First of all, organophosphates are very detrimental to developing fetuses. UC Berkeley scientists did a seventeen-year study of mothers and children in the Salinas Valley and found a direct correlation between a pregnant woman's exposure to organophosphates and resulting brain damage to the child. For every 522 pounds of exposure within a kilometer of where the mother resides, the child, by the time it reaches age seven, will have lost 2.2 points of IQ.

If you go online, you can see where the spraying occurs. There are whole residential areas filled with people where this concentration occurs continuously. Once these children grow up, they are intellectually deficient. They go to schools surrounding these fields where they use this developmental neurotoxin chlorpyrifos as an insecticide. Chlorpyrifos is drift-prone so once it is sprayed it moves through the air and into the classrooms, and it interferes with normal development of the brain and spinal cord.

So these children are impacted on two fronts, prenatally and then during their primary school years. The vast majority of these children, something like 90%,

are Latino. I find it hard to believe that this would ever go on in a white neighborhood. It would simply not be tolerated.

Prior to the Trump administration, the EPA banned chlorpyrifos nationwide and then Scott Pruitt, the new director, had a conversation with DOW executives and reversed the ban. So right now we are trying to get it banned at least in the state of California.

A couple months ago, we went to the EPA office and met with one of their committees, the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment. DOW executives gave their position and then those of us who came from all over the state to address this issue gave our statement, and they voted 8-2 in our favor. This means that chlorpyrifos is now listed as a Prop. 65 developmental neurotoxin, so we at least have that labeling on the containers.

But this past year has been a travesty for farmworkers. Thirty-four workers in Bakersfield were hospitalized because of exposure to chlorpyrifos and then another 17 in central California.

Dennis Bernstein: This can involve a whole series of treatments and then you have to worry about the long-term damage.

Ann Lopez: Absolutely, there is the issue of chronic exposure.

Dennis Bernstein: Could you describe the suffering that's involved? What are the symptoms like?

Ann Lopez: They become very weak, very nauseous, some even collapse out in the fields. The ones I worry about most are the children, who face permanent brain and spinal cord damage. I have studied farmworker issues for many years now and every parent I have spoken with wanted their children educated and to have a better life out of farm work. What are the chances for children to succeed academically and move on when their brains don't develop normally? We have a program called Safe Ag Safe Schools and we are partnered with Californians for Pesticide Reform.

Dennis Bernstein: These pesticides were created by companies that began working for the US defense industries making toxins to kill people. What we are seeing here is an attempt to mainstream the industry into everyday life.

Ann Lopez: Whenever I meet with Mark Weller, Co-Director at Californians for Pesticide Reform, I ask him, "Has World War II ended yet?" We are still using these horrific chemicals and continue to spray million of pounds of this poison all over the planet, all in the name of profit.

We had a press conference in Salinas on March 31, 2017 and I remember asking at the end of my talk, “Are your profits really worth the compromised brains of our children?” You can ask the same thing about the biosphere, and so on. At what point do we stop destroying the very planet that supports our existence?

These chemicals play a crucial role in all this. I don’t think there is any excuse for using them. Studies have long shown that if we converted to an all-organic, regenerative agriculture tomorrow, we could feed every human being on the planet and mitigate climate change by 30-40 percent.

So the question becomes, why aren’t we doing that? The only reason is to keep these outdated industries in operation which are basically destroying the planet and all of its life-forms. Personally, I find it unethical and reprehensible, and it can only happen when the public is kept uninformed.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of “Flashpoints” on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.

Farmworkers Protest EPA’s Pesticide Ruling

As part of President Trump’s campaign against President Obama’s environmental regulations, Trump’s EPA has rejected a proposed rule banning a brain-damaging pesticide, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

The decision by President Trump’s Environmental Protection Agency to rebuff the advice of its own scientists to ban the brain-damaging pesticide chlorpyrifos has prompted protests from California’s farm worker communities, now demanding an immediate statewide ban of the dangerous chemical.

A delegation delivered more than 167,000 petition signatures along with a letter signed by 75 organizations representing hundreds of thousands of Californians. The petition was also co-signed by Care2, Center for Biological Diversity, Center for Environmental Health, Center for Food Safety, Courage Campaign, CREDO, Friends of the Earth, and Pesticide Action Network.

EPA scientists have documented that chlorpyrifos can cause serious and profound neurological and respiratory damage, as well as developmental delays, autism and

IQ loss for children – even in very small doses, say the activists.

They maintain that the use of chlorpyrifos is particularly problematic in California, “where more than one million pounds of the neurotoxic organophosphate pesticide are used each year, much of it in close proximity to schools and residences. Accounting for roughly 10% of the nationwide total, this chemical is applied on dozens of crops in the state. In the Monterey Bay Area, chlorpyrifos is most heavily used on wine grapes, Brussels sprouts, and apple orchards. In 2016, the air monitor at the Salinas Airport registered average air levels of chlorpyrifos three times higher than the EPA’s target risk level.”

According to Californians for Pesticide Reform (CPR), a statewide coalition of more than 190 organizations, “after years of stalling, EPA was set to implement a ban on chlorpyrifos use on food crops in March. But under intense pressure from Dow Chemical, the largest manufacturer of the neurotoxic pesticide, EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt reversed the agency’s plan and announced he was allowing continued agricultural use of chlorpyrifos.”

The group’s statement went on to say “just last November, the EPA announced that it intended to revoke all food tolerances of chlorpyrifos, calling exposure to any amount unsafe. Underscoring the importance of this proposed ban, the agency cited the serious dangers of chlorpyrifos exposure and added that young children risk exposure from food residues alone that are 14,000 percent higher than the level EPA currently believes is safe.”

I spoke with Lucia Calderon, an organizer with Safe Ag Safe Schools and Californians for Pesticide Reform, about the battle against chlorpyrifos.

Dennis Bernstein: Tell us exactly what it is – what’s the chemistry we’re talking about here? And then we’ll talk about how dangerous it is.

Lucia Calderon: Chlorpyrifos is an organophosphate insecticide, and its main action is to harm the brains of the insects that the agricultural industry is trying to kill. And, incidentally, it has been shown to really, really harm brains, especially children’s developing brains.

DB: Children’s developing brains – say a little bit more about that. Are there cases? Are there studies being conducted now? Are there examples of kids being hurt? What can you say about that?

LC: Yeah, well this is a really historical issue. Chlorpyrifos was actually banned for residential use. It started being phased out in 2000, because of its proven association with developmental harm. And UC Berkeley and Columbia University both had big parts in these studies. In 2000 the science was known that chlorpyrifos was extremely harmful to developing brains and bodies, and it

was banned for residential use.

But nowadays it is not banned for agricultural use, and it's still being used in our fields, especially in California fields. We account for a fifth of the entire nation's use of this chemical pesticide. And so, what we're looking at is science that has been established, and is continuing to come out, showing these really detrimental effects of this chemical. And there is complete inaction on the federal level.

DB: So the EPA was set to pass a ban on this, right? Until the new folks came in?

LC: Yes, exactly. The EPA was set on a deadline to revoke the tolerances of this chemical on March 31, 2017, and just a couple of days before that date our new EPA administrator, Scott Pruitt, reversed that ban. So what we're doing now is going to the State of California. As a big user of chlorpyrifos, we are demanding that the State of California impose a ban on this chemical. And, as I mentioned the science before, a lot of it is coming out of California. We have the UC Berkeley CHAMACOS study, which stands for the Center for Health of Mother and Children of the Salinas Valley, right where Safe Ag Safe Schools is located. That study has been going on for almost 20 years, showing the connections between prenatal organophosphate chlorpyrifos exposure and lowering IQ, and respiratory issues as well.

DB: Tell us a little bit about who's involved. Your group is working with the Pesticide Action Network: are there community groups or teachers involved? How are you bringing in the families?

LC: Californians for Pesticide Reform is a statewide coalition, and Safe Ag Safe Schools is only one of the organizations involved. And we represent the communities of the front line. We are from the affected communities, and we all get to come together through this statewide coalition, and then demand improvements and better protections for people living on the front lines of pesticide exposure – those working in the fields and living and attending school very close to the fields.

DB: Are there still problems in terms of schools? Does that come into it?

LC: Yes, definitely. And even regarding chlorpyrifos, we have a city in Monterey County, Greenfield, and two schools there – the middle school and the high school – rank 9th and 4th in the state for chlorpyrifos use within a quarter of a mile. We're seeing issues with chlorpyrifos being applied around schools and we're also just seeing issues with pesticide use in general around schools.

The most recent action we've had on that was establishing buffer zones around

schools where pesticides could not be applied. We have been demanding for years a full mile buffer zone at all times around schools, where pesticides cannot be applied. And what we got were quarter mile buffer zones for parts of the day – from 6am to 6pm Monday through Friday. So we're still fighting on that front as well. Right now we're really trying to get chlorpyrifos banned, because it's one of the nastiest chemicals out there.

DB: This is incredibly important because it affects children and their ability to learn. I understand that some of this, depending upon how you're doused with this, could cause permanent damage, particularly in pregnant women and young, formative kids.

LC: Yes, one of the reasons that the federal EPA was going to ban the chemical was that the U.S. EPA found that for pregnant women and developing babies and for some children just the amount of chlorpyrifos they were consuming on food as food residue was way too high. The reason that the EPA was banning it was not only for food residues, but for how much is in the air. There's also no safe amount of chlorpyrifos in drinking water, and it has contaminated a lot of our water supplies as well. So the danger is on all fronts, but especially for women of childbearing age and young children.

DB: And I'm gonna spell that because the name is a little bit unclear: it's c-h-l-o-r-p-y-r-i-f-o-s – that's the brain-harming chemistry that we're talking about?

LC: Exactly, and it is produced by Dow AgroSciences.

DB: Dow?

LC: Yes, Dow Chemical. The CEO of Dow Chemical [Andrew Liveris] is the head of the American Manufacturing Council. Dow Chemical contributed a million dollars to Trump's inauguration dinner. We're now hearing reports that Scott Pruitt met with Dow right before he decided to reverse the ban of chlorpyrifos. So they're a really big actor in this fight right now.

DB: Yeah, and they certainly have the reputation, shall we say, for doing terrible things to people. We thank you for this important information.

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