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SPECIAL REPORT: Pesticide Could Have Serious Health Risks



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MONTEREY, Calif -- California's strawberry crop, the little red fruit that produces a lot of cash for farmers, has a dark cloud hanging over it.

The pesticide used in strawberries, Methyl Bromide, is being phased out because it depletes the ozone. Its replacement is a controversial chemical, Methyl Iodide.

While this chemical has been deemed safe for strawberries, questions have been raised if its safe for workers to apply.

UCSF doctor Paul Blanc said exposure to this chemical will definitely cause cancer. Blanc was part of a scientific committee that reviewed Methyl Iodide. He said data showed the chemical caused cancer in research mice.

"It's almost absurd to think that this is being introduced to commerce," Blanc said.

Methyl Iodide is legal in 48 states, including California. Only six states are actually using it. California farmers haven't used it yet, but they're about to.

In a county like Monterey County where 80 percent of the nation's strawberries are grown, this could present serious risks to farmworkers.

But Arysta LifeScience, the company which markets the product, stands behind its safety.

"The data we've generated and other data has shown it's not a cancer causing agent. There's a lot of things negatively said about it. But no one's produced any data," said Jeff Tweedy, head of Business Development for Arysta LifeScience.

The California Department of Pesticide Regulation approved Methyl Iodide for use. They said, after the most extensive evaluation in their department's history, it is safe to use under stringent conditions without exposing workers, the public and environment to harmful levels.

Specially trained farmworkers must wear protective gear when using Methyl Iodide. Treated fields must be at least half mile from homes or schools and be covered with tarps until planting,

"You cannot assume that a plastic tarp put down on the soil in high winds near the ocean is going to stay in place and keep the chemical from dispersing in the air," said Greg Loarie, attorney for Earth Justice.

Earthjustice and the California Rural Legal Assistance group have filed a lawsuit in Alameda County court to ban Methyl Iodide. Michael Marsh represents two migrant workers in the lawsuit, including one who helps apply pesticides. One farm worker told Marsh he is concerned that 10 or 20 years from now, when he is no longer employed and doesn't have health insurance, he'll come down with cancer.

Another farmworker told KTVU she covers up with a hat and long sleeves because of the pesticides. Despite her concerns, she has to work so all she can do is take precautions.

The federal government said the most one can be exposed to Methyl Iodide is 150 parts per billion.

California's threshold is much lower than the federal government's -- a farmworker can only be exposed to 96 parts per billion of methyl iodide. An independent group of scientists working with the state said the amount should be much lower than that. They only want .8 parts per billion exposure to farmworkers.

"We agreed with our scientists. This is a hazardous material. Unfortunately, the bureaucrats above the scientists simply rewrote the numbers," said Blanc.

A pending lawsuit prevents the California Department of Pesticide Regulation to comment on how they decided 96 parts per billion was safe.

Monterey County Farm Bureau says Methyl Iodide is a crucial component to preventing diseases in fruit and maintaining the current quality and quantity.

"Used safely and according to the label and with the applicators who are certified to do so, it is at this point been proven safe," said Norm Groot, Monterey County Farm Bureau Executive Director.

While not one grower in Monterey County has applied for the expensive treatment, Groot expects the first applications in the coming months.

Governor Jerry Brown has said he could reconsider the approval of this controversial chemical.

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