

PRESS RELEASE

Beyond Pesticides/National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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New EPA Truck Banner Campaign Misleads Public on Pesticide Safety As It's Unveiled in Washington, D.C. Today

As the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) begins a new public education campaign to encourage people to read pesticide product labels, an environmental organization says the effort will do more harm than good in giving the public the mistaken impression that pesticides are safe when used according to the label. Beyond Pesticides/National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides says that EPA needs to warn people about the health and environmental hazards that pesticides pose, especially to children, the still inadequate health and safety testing that supports product registration with the agency, the problem with undisclosed yet potentially toxic "inert" ingredients, and the finding of contaminants in products such as hexachlorobenzene. Beyond Pesticides urges the public to consider using alternative non-toxic methods for pest management and only use pesticides as a last resort.

Washington, DC, December 4, 2000 – With the unveiling today of a new EPA campaign to encourage people to read pesticide labels before using, a national environmental organization called the program misleading because of the hazards it says that pesticides pose. The new EPA campaign takes the form of a huge truck banner that says, "Pesticides are meant to poison [picture of insects], not these [picture of babies]." The pilot effort is part of EPA's "Read the Label First" and provides a toll-free number to call. The pilot run of the campaign, targeted at "consumers in urban, minority and ethnically diverse communities," will cover eastern states from Connecticut to northern Virginia, and, in the west, the cities of Los Angeles, San Diego, and Phoenix.

According to Beyond Pesticides executive director, Jay Feldman, "This campaign, while well-intentioned, will have the unintended effect of leaving people with the impression that, if they follow the pesticide label, they and their children will be safe. Nothing could be further from the truth." EPA has been engaged in an effort, delayed over the last two decades, to reevaluate the hazards of pesticides and reregister them in accordance with modern testing standards. However, most of the major pesticides, used in homes, schools, workplaces, gardens and parks have never been fully tested to meet with these standards. Recently, a widely used pesticide, chlorpyrifos (Dursban™), was voluntarily withdrawn for residential uses because of toxicity to children, but will be sold by retail stores until the end of 2001 and used indefinitely. "Following the pesticide label will lead to unacceptable exposure to families and children," according to Mr. Feldman.

Of concern to Beyond Pesticides is a range of issues that raise serious questions about the risks that pesticides, when used in accordance with label instructions, present to consumers. The group lists the following issues of concern:

■ Of the 48 most commonly used pesticides in schools and homes, 21 are probably or possible human carcinogens, 27 cause reproductive effects, 31 affect the nervous system, 31 cause liver or kidney damage, 41 are sensitizers or irritants and 17 cause birth defects.

■ The majority of pesticides in use have not been reevaluated by EPA. For example, the synthetic pyrethroids, a widely used family of chemicals including permethrin, will not be reregistered until the end of 2002. The widely used organophosphates, including chlorpyrifos and diazinon and malathion, have not been fully reevaluated.

■ Pesticide products contain undisclosed, secret ingredients known as “inert” ingredients that can be as or more toxic than the active product ingredient. Inerts, often petrochemicals like toluene or xylene, are generally the largest percentage ingredient of a pesticide product. They form the solution, the dust, or the granule in which the active ingredient is mixed. According to a recent report, 209 inerts are considered hazardous air and water pollutants, 14 have been assessed as “extremely hazardous, 84 are reportable to the Toxic Chemical Release Inventory, 21 are known or suspected carcinogens, and 127 are regarded as occupational hazards. Yet, when these materials are in pesticide products, they are not disclosed.

■ A study sponsored by the National Cancer Institute indicates that household and garden pesticide use can increase the risk of childhood leukemia as much as seven-fold.

■ Studies show that children living in households where pesticides are used suffer elevated rates of leukemia, brain cancer and soft tissue sarcoma.

■ EPA and Dow AgroSciences recently agreed to phase-out chlorpyrifos (Dursban™), one of the most commonly used insecticides in homes and schools, because of its high risks to children. The pesticide can continue to be used in homes and schools until existing stocks are depleted. It poisons children by reducing the body’s production of the enzyme cholinesterase, necessary to the transmission of nerve impulses, triggering a range of symptoms from nausea, dizziness, headaches, aching joints to disorientation and inability to concentrate.

■ Other commonly used pesticides in schools may cause health effects such as vomiting, convulsions, skin irritations, liver damage, flu-like symptoms and asthma-like problems.

■ The American Medical Association’s Council on Scientific Affairs states that “Particular uncertainty exists regarding the long-term health effects of low-dose pesticide exposure . . . Considering these data gaps, it is prudent . . . to limit pesticide exposure . . . and to use the least toxic chemical pesticide or non-chemical alternative.”

■ Albert Greene, National IPM Coordinator for the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), has implemented IPM in 30 million square feet, approximately 7,000 federal buildings, in the capital area without spraying toxic insecticides. Greene has stated, “[I]t can be pragmatic, economical, and effective on a massive scale.”

■ According to EPA, “[P]reliminary indications from IPM programs in school systems suggest that long term costs of IPM may be less than a conventional pest control program.”