

(Earth Talk) Atrazine in drinking water

Written by EarthTalk® □ From the Editors of E/The Environmental Magazine
Wednesday, 12 May 2010 13:29



Dear EarthTalk: *I understand there's an issue with the herbicide atrazine showing up in dangerous quantities in drinking water, mostly throughout the central U.S. Why is this happening and what's being done about it?*
-- Marcus Gerde, Spokane, WA

Atrazine is an herbicide that is widely used across the U.S. and elsewhere to control both broadleaf and grassy weeds in large-scale agricultural operations growing corn, sorghum, sugar cane and other foods. While its use is credited with increasing agricultural yields by as much as six percent, there is a dark side. The nonprofit Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) reports that atrazine exposure has been shown to impair the reproductive systems of amphibians and mammals, and has been linked to cancer in both laboratory animals and humans. Male frogs exposed to minute doses of atrazine can develop female sex characteristics, including hermaphroditism and the presence of eggs in the testes. Researchers suspect that these effects are amplified when atrazine and other harmful agricultural chemicals are employed together.

Atrazine's wide use makes its impacts that much scarier. NRDC reports that it is the most commonly detected pesticide or herbicide in U.S. waters, with the highest levels found in Indiana, Missouri and Nebraska. The Southeast also faces atrazine overload issues. What irks many public health advocates is that, even though study after study implicates atrazine in a long list of environmental and health problems, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) still allows farms to apply 75 million pounds of it each year. The European Union banned atrazine in 2004 due to persistent groundwater pollution there.

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Critics of the EPA accuse the agency of selling out the health of the American people so industrial agricultural companies can make big profits. Indeed, in 2003, the EPA estimated a total annual economic impact, if atrazine were to be banned, of over \$2 billion, including a yield loss plus increased herbicide cost averaging \$28 per acre. In 2006, the EPA concluded that triazine herbicides (such as atrazine) posed “no harm that would result to the general U.S. population, infants, children or other...consumers.”

In light of the EPA’s refusal to consider a ban on atrazine, NRDC and other groups have taken up the cause of educating consumers about the dangers posed by our national addiction to dangerous herbicides and pesticides, and lobbying elected officials to add their voices. President Obama has promised to take a hard look at atrazine, but it remains to be seen how long it will be before any such review takes place.

Of course, organic farmers aren’t waiting around for Obama to ban atrazine. By planting diverse crops, rotating them regularly and employing other age-old agricultural techniques, a new generation of American farmers is learning that expensive chemicals may not be able to boost their yields enough to warrant the high financial and environmental costs associated with constant chemical spraying.

As for you and I, the best way to prevent ingesting atrazine with our tap water is to buy a water filter that employs activated charcoal. NRDC publishes a free list of water filter recommendations on its Simple Steps website. If you’re on a well, NRDC recommends having its water tested annually for atrazine and other contaminants. Even bottled water producers may not filter out atrazine from their source aquifers, so filtering at the tap is the only way consumers can be sure to remove it along with other contaminants.

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