

Groups Ask FDA To Ban Antibacterial Products Containing Triclosan

By Aviva Glaser

Citing health concerns, a coalition of public health and environmental groups, led by Beyond Pesticides, petitioned the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on October 25, 2005 to pull from the market widely used household products that contain the germ fighting chemical triclosan. Scientific studies dispute the need for the chemical and link its widespread use to health and environmental effects and the development of stronger bacteria that are increasingly difficult to control. “The failure to regulate triclosan as the law requires puts millions of people and the environment at unnecessary risk to toxic effects and elevated risk to other bacterial diseases,” said Jay Feldman, Executive Director of Beyond Pesticides.

The groups are asking FDA to recognize the urgency of the problem and expedite action to ban household triclosan use after an FDA advisory panel found in October 2005 that the chemical provides little benefit for healthy consumers but could carry environmental and public health risks. The Nonprescription Drugs Advisory Committee, a group made of scientists and experts in the field, voted 11-1 that antibacterial soaps and washes were no more effective than regular soap and water in fighting infections—both work equally well.

Retired senior National Institutes for Health scientist in microbiology and immunology, Cecil Fox, Ph.D., said, “I am troubled that governmental review of triclosan has failed to scrutinize the development of resistant microorganisms and the by-product, antibiotic-resistant microbial populations, and the transport and accumulation of triclosan residues through skin and mucosal absorption. FDA’s failure is a national scandal.”

Triclosan is found in hundreds of common everyday products, including deodorants, toothpastes, cosmetics, fabrics, plastics and nearly half of all commercial soaps. Triclosan is used so commonly that it has made its way into the human body, with studies showing residues in the umbilical cord blood of infants and in breast milk of mothers. A growing body of research finds that triclosan promotes the emergence of bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics and antibacterial cleaners. Triclosan has also been linked to the formation of dioxin, a highly toxic, carcinogenic substance included in the United Nation’s list of twelve persistent organic pollutants (POPs) and the formation of chloroform, which is classified by EPA as a probable human carcinogen

The petition points out that the household use of triclosan results in contamination of the nation’s waterways. Triclosan is among the most prevalent contaminants not removed by typical wastewater treatment plants, and is commonly detected in streams and other waterways. This creates the conditions that could lead to the formation of dioxin. William Arnold, Ph.D.



Associate Professor, University of Minnesota, Department of Civil Engineering, explains, “Upon triclosan exposure to sunlight, two of the products generated are 2,8-dichlorodibenzodioxin and 2,4-dichlorophenol. If triclosan was exposed to chlorine (from water treatment) and then sunlight, there is the potential for more highly chlorinated products to be produced.”

“With enormous medical concern about antibiotic resistant disease, doctors will tell you that nothing beats good old soap and water,” said Michael Green, Executive Director of the Center for Environmental Health. “FDA’s inaction on triclosan is short-sighted; the agency needs to take a longer view towards protecting public health and the environment.”

The petitioners include Beyond Pesticides, Center for Environmental Health, Advocates for Environmental Human Rights, Alaska Community Action on Toxics, Breast Cancer Action, Breast Cancer Fund, Campaign for Safe Cosmetics, Citizens Environmental Coalition, Environmental Health Fund, Indigenous Environmental Network, Natural Resources Defense Council, Maryland Pesticide Network, Northwest Indiana Toxics Action Project, San Diego Oceans Foundation, Women’s Voices for the Earth, and the organic retailer Seventh Generation, Inc.

For more information, contact Beyond Pesticides and see the ChemWatch factsheet and article in the Fall and Winter 2004 issues of Pesticides and You. The full petition and press release is also available at www.beyondpesticides.org.