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USDA: What pesticide use?

The agency cravenly stops measuring the poisons used in U.S. farming

Posted by [Tom Philpott](#) at 3:46 PM on 23 May 2008

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The USDA's "[Agricultural Chemical Use Database](#)" is a wonderful thing. With a few clicks, consumers, researchers, and anyone else kind find all manner of information on pesticides, broken down by crop and by state.

As an agriculture writer, I have an interest in industrial corn, by far our biggest crop. With a [simple search](#), I find that corn farmers have increased applications of glyphosphate -- Monsanto's broad-spectrum herbicide Roundup -- by a factor of *eight* since Monsanto rolled out its Roundup Ready corn seeds in 1995.

I also follow farm-worker justice issues. I find that in strawberry fields, use of methyl bromide -- a highly carcinogenic fumigant -- actually rose between 2000 and 2006. Methyl bromide is banned under international treaties signed by the U.S., but our government keeps squeezing out extensions to the ban. That such a well-documented health threat remains in heavy use is devastating for farmworkers and their offspring.

By now you can see where I'm going with this. Citing budget cuts, the USDA recently announced that it would stop gathering this vital data, reports Elanor Starmer on [Ethicurean](#).

Elanor points us to a [letter](#) [PDF] produced by NRDC and signed by 45 NGOs protesting this unacceptable development. Addressed to USDA higher-ups as well as that piece of furniture for the chemical industry, Stephen Johnson of the EPA, the letter sums the situation thusly:

NASS [a USDA office] has regularly collected and published agricultural chemical use data since at least 1991, but has dramatically scaled back its program in recent years. First, the agency replaced its annual surveys of major field crops with biennial ones. Then, in the 2007 growing season, data collection was limited to just three crops--cotton, apples and organic apples. Now, NASS has taken the most drastic step--announcing that it will not collect agricultural chemical use data on any crops during the 2008 growing season.

NASS's Agricultural Chemical Usage reports are the only reliable, publicly available source of data on pesticide and fertilizer use outside of California. Elimination of this program will severely hamper the efforts of the USDA, the Environmental Protection Agency

(EPA), land grant scientists, and state officials to perform pesticide risk assessments and make informed policy decisions on pesticide use. In particular, USDA and EPA will have difficulty tracking their progress in meeting their policy commitments to reduce the use of hazardous pesticides through adoption of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) practices and to support IPM research.

The letter goes on to state that without this public database, researchers and policymakers will be forced to use private data-collection services that are "extremely expensive and unreliable." Sounds like classic crony-capitalist privatization to me.

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