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'What About The Children?' The Ultimate Activist Red Herring



By Cameron English — August 11, 2022

Activist groups like to use children's health as a bargaining chip in debates about pesticide safety. I'm a dad, and I call shenanigans on this disingenuous scare tactic.



Image by Bessi via Pixabay

As a new dad, there's no one I love more than my son. I want to protect him from danger, raise him with the right values, and, more basically, feed him safe, nutritious food. Most parents no doubt share this sentiment, which is why I find attempts by anti-chemical activists to scare moms and dads so despicable. The groups that dishonestly warn about the carcinogenic potential of [pizza](#) and [baby](#)

[food](#) use parents' protective instincts against them. This sort of activism is evil, plain and simple.

Consider this [recent story](#) from the New Lede titled [Prioritize children's health above agribusiness profits](#). Authored by Lendri Purcell, founder of the adorably named Families Advocating for Chemical and Toxics Safety, the article is as inaccurate as it is shameless. [1], [2] Purcell tried to make the case that our children are unnecessarily exposed to toxic pesticides, because corrupt regulators can't be bothered to ban them. She failed. Let's look at some specifics.

In 2012, The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) urged policymakers to do more to protect children from pesticides. Yet, a decade little [sic], our regulators have virtually ignored this plea.

The AAP is a generally reliable source of medical information, but on this point, they are just wrong. For instance, the organization pointed to dosing experiments in animals and epidemiological studies which supposedly link pesticide exposure to “adverse birth outcomes including preterm birth, low birth weight, and congenital anomalies, pediatric cancers, neurobehavioral and cognitive deficits, and asthma.”

What the AAP never bothered to mention is that the doses in those animal studies [are massive](#), often hundreds or thousands of times higher than any exposure children actually face. The epidemiological evidence isn't much better; the studies it comes from are [usually based on](#) low-quality exposure data, for example, questionnaires completed by people who already have the disease in question. This research in no way suggests that real-world pesticide exposure poses a risk to our children.

Efforts to ban glyphosate, the active ingredient in Roundup herbicide, have been pushed in countries around the world, but have fallen short in the United States, despite the fact that in 2015 the International Agency for Research on Cancer ([IARC](#)) declared glyphosate to be a probable human carcinogen.

Who cares what other countries do? The data is what matters, and many other developed nations have a [regulatory framework](#) that allows them to ban chemicals even when the evidence shows they can be safely used. IARC's 2015 monograph, for the nth time, is worthless—a [fatally flawed document](#) authored by ethically suspect researchers [employed](#) by trial lawyers. Nobody outside the environmental movement, and [I really mean nobody](#), takes IARC's glyphosate determination seriously.

Meanwhile, more weeds are becoming 'resistant' to glyphosate, so farmers dealing with glyphosate-resistant weeds often use glyphosate in combination with additional weed killers, such as 2,4-D, and dicamba, which come with their own health concerns.

This is partially correct; glyphosate has been overused in certain cases. That said, banning weed-control tools is a dangerous mistake. The fewer pesticides farmers can access, the [more reliant](#) they become on the remaining chemistries. This risks exacerbating the resistance issue. Fortunately, there are viable solutions on the horizon, including [new herbicides](#) that weeds will have a difficult time overcoming, as well as genetic engineering solutions [that can reverse](#) herbicide resistance. Naturally, anti-pesticide groups [oppose](#) these innovations.

Though the EPA assures us glyphosate and other widely used pesticides are safe, courts have challenged those assurances with findings of EPA shortcomings related to many different pesticides.

I don't care what courts say, and neither should you. Judges and jurors have no expertise in chemistry, toxicology, or agriculture. When we rely on the legal system for pesticide regulation, we see judges declare that [bees and fish](#) are identical. Let that sink in before you read on.

In July, the Office of Inspector General (OIG) for the EPA issued a scathing report identifying many failures by the agency in evaluating the cancer risk of a soil fumigant called 1,3-Dichloropropene ... [\[The OIG found\]](#) that the EPA falsely declared that "no studies were identified as containing potentially relevant information," while the OIG easily found more than 100 relevant studies on 1,3-D.

The EPA is a flawed organization. Our resident toxicologist Susan Goldhaber was also [somewhat critical](#) of the agency in this case, though she disagreed that its mistakes were enough to compromise the review of 1,3-Dichloropropene.

In any case, the regulator accepted most of the OIG's criticism and responded accordingly. Of the nine recommendations, EPA "generally agreed with Recommendations 3–7 and 9," the report noted ([p 16](#)). "Recommendation 3 is resolved with corrective actions pending. Recommendations 4–7 and 9 are also resolved with corrective actions pending." The agency challenged the remaining criticisms, and its reasoning is summarized [in the report](#).

Putting that dispute aside for a moment, consider that 14 experts (who work neither for the EPA nor a pesticide manufacturer) recently reviewed all the evidence on the carcinogenicity of 1,3-Dichloropropene. you'll never guess [what they found](#):

Based on a robust peer review of the current scientific information, a cancer [weight of evidence] classification of 'not likely to be carcinogenic to humans' is best supported for 1,3-dichloropropene. This conclusion is reached with a high degree of consensus (consensus score = 0.92) across expert panel members.

I share Purcell's desire to "put our kids' health first." However, protecting children from harm requires that we properly assess the threats they face. If we waste our time and money on issues of minimal concern, [real problems](#) such as sexually transmitted infections and mental health disorders will get less attention than they deserve. All this squabbling about pesticides does nobody any good.

[1] Are there any families against chemical safety?

[2] The New Lede is a pet project of the [Environmental Working Group](#), an organization with little interest in scientific accuracy.