

## BUSH OPTS FOR POISON (6/05)

Methyl bromide is one of the most toxic of the pesticides that increasingly threaten public health – so toxic an international treaty has ordered it banned worldwide as of next year. Yet the Bush administration is seeking to exempt many of the pesticide's U.S. users from the treaty.

The international community's main concern is that widespread use of methyl bromide is seriously damaging the earth's protective ozone layer and thus subjecting people everywhere to the possibility of skin cancer, cataracts and other ailments caused by exposure to ultraviolet radiation.

That's true, certainly. But of more immediate concern should be the severe effect the pesticide is having on the hundreds of thousands of farm workers and other Americans who are regularly exposed to methyl bromide because of its widespread use in agriculture and other industries.

U.S. growers of strawberries, grapes, ornamental plants and more than 100 other crops spray methyl bromide on the soil to kill insects and weeds and use it to fumigate produce shipped to foreign markets. It's used in flour mills and grain storage facilities, and used to treat golf course sod and to rid warehouses and other buildings of pests.

As any of those using methyl bromide will tell you, it is a very effective pest killer. But as any public health worker will tell you, the pesticide – actually a nerve gas – can do severe damage to the brain and nervous systems of those exposed to it, and to their lungs, kidneys, eyes and skin. It can cause birth defects. It can kill.

At the least, victims experience uncontrollable trembling, vomiting, blackouts, pounding headaches, fainting, nausea, swollen lips and tongue, unusual muscle pain, inflamed skin, fatigue and numbness in their hands, feet, arms and legs.

Those affected have included not just people working directly with the pesticide, but others who have been exposed as it drifted from fields and buildings that were being sprayed. That's included children in nearby schools and residents of nearby homes.

There have been thousands of documented instances of such problems over the past two decades, as well as plenty of scientific evidence that methyl bromide's use is indeed seriously damaging the ozone layer.

Effective but safe alternatives to methyl bromide are available. But growers complain they'd cost more and put them at a competitive disadvantage with foreign growers who use poorly paid laborers rather than pesticides to control weeds and pests. That's right, U.S. growers, who pay their workers an average of less than \$8 an hour – less than \$10,000 a year – and provide few, if any, fringe benefits, actually are complaining about competition from cheap foreign labor as an excuse to subject their miserably paid workers to poison.

There's another bit of fine irony here in that growers of the tobacco that poisons many Americans and millions of others throughout the world are among those arguing for the continued use of the pesticide that also poisons many.

Administration officials will make their formal request to exempt growers of tobacco seedlings and other users of methyl bromide from the ban on use of the pesticide at a meeting later this month of parties to the treaty, the Montreal Protocol, that in 1987 set a timetable for outlawing substances that harm the ozone layer.

U.S. users aren't just trying to maintain their current levels. They want to use even more. Bush administration officials, for instance, are seeking permission for members of the California Grape and Tree Fruit League, who've typically used less than 650,000 pounds of methyl bromide yearly, to use more than 1.5 million pounds a year after 2005.

The administration demands threaten to all but undo the genuine progress that's been made since the Montreal Protocol was signed. In those 17 years, use of the pesticide has dropped by fully 70 percent worldwide. But the U.S. action, the first by any country to try to upset a decision to phase out a substance and increase its production, undoubtedly would cause a surge in worldwide use of methyl bromide. It would seriously undermine the treaty and reverse what has been a steady and hopeful trend toward a cleaner and safer environment for everyone, everywhere.

The Bush administration, however, apparently is much more concerned with helping some of its key backers avoid spending part of their profits than with helping make the environment cleaner and safer for the profit of us all.