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Farmer Industry Unhappy That EPA is Studying Weed Killer Again

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By Ellyn Ferguson

In response to objections about the popular herbicide atrazine, the Environmental Protection Agency under the Bush administration approved its continued use in 2006, saying it was “not likely” to cause cancer in humans. But under the Obama administration, the agency is re-evaluating its findings in light of new studies questioning the chemical’s effects on humans and indications that it can so disrupt hormones in amphibians that a frog, say, might become both male and female.

Used mainly to control weeds in cornfields across the Midwest and around the world, atrazine, made in Switzerland by Syngenta, nevertheless was banned in 2003 by the European Union because it was polluting groundwater. “It’s used in more than 80 countries, but it’s now outlawed in all of Europe,” Tyrone Hayes, a biologist at the University of California, Berkeley, is quoted by the President’s Cancer Panel in a report this month. “The main point here is that here’s a compound that we use 80 million pounds of, and it’s illegal in the home country of the company that makes it.”

The agriculture industry, which thought the question of using atrazine in the United States had been settled, is unhappy with another review. Thirty-three House members — 13 Democrats and 20 Republicans — have written EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson saying her agency appears to be yielding to pressure from environmental groups that are campaigning to have the chemical banned.

Those who signed the letter wrote that there is no “credible evidence” that atrazine is harmful to humans or the environment. Banning the chemical might mean smaller corn yields and less money for growers, they wrote.

Oklahoma Rep. Frank D. Lucas , ranking Republican on the Agriculture Committee and one of those who signed the letter, accused the EPA of continuing an assault on agriculture. The review, coupled with proposed cuts in farm programs, he said, “show the administration is not too concerned about production agriculture.”