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Watchdog group: PFAS is active ingredient in 13% of Maine pesticides

An analysis by the Environmental Working Group found 55 so-called forever chemicals listed as active ingredients in 1,426 of Maine's state-approved pesticides.

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One in 10 pesticides approved for use in Maine this summer contains a so-called forever chemical.

The Environmental Working Group, an environmental nonprofit based in Washington, D.C., found 13% of state-registered pesticides – or 1,426 out of 10,695 – have PFAS, or a per or poly-fluoroalkyl substance, as an active ingredient, according to a report released Tuesday.

Maine compiled a working list of 56 different active ingredients that meet its state-specific definition of a forever chemical – it must have at least one fully fluorinated carbon bond – identified among those pesticides registered with the Maine Board of Pesticide Control as of June 5.

Maine's PFAS definition is aggressive. The Environmental Protection Agency defines PFAS as having at least two fully fluorinated carbon bonds, compared to Maine's single-bond threshold. That is why a Maine list of pesticides that contain PFAS would include some that don't show up on the EPA's list.



Among the PFAS found among the state pesticide list: tembotrione, a corn weed killer; tralopyril, an algaecide in boat paint to keep barnacles off; and bifenthrin, an insecticide found in hardware stores sold under brand names like Ortho Max and Scotts Turf Builder.

This is the first year manufacturers had to disclose if the pesticide they want to register in Maine contains a forever chemical. The same law requiring PFAS registration now says that all nonessential products sold in Maine must be PFAS-free by 2030, including pesticides.

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"PFAS in pesticides can pose risks to agricultural workers and communities, downstream water users when pesticides are washed into the water supply, and people who use these products in their homes and gardens," said EWG researcher Lillian Zhou.

EWG did not analyze the list of Maine pesticides with PFAS to determine volume of units sold within the state, assess the toxicity of the specific PFAS compounds found in

Called forever chemicals because of how long they take to break down, the manmade compounds are used in common household products and industrial settings to repel grease, water or heat. Even have been linked to compromised immune systems, low birth weights and several cancers.

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“PFAS are harmful to human health even at minuscule concentrations,” said Olga Naidenko, EWG’s vice president for science investigations. “PFAS wreak havoc on human health, wildlife and the environment. The entire PFAS class of chemicals poses a significant health concern.”

Maine plans to hire a consultant to prepare a comprehensive risk analysis of the 56 PFAS compounds identified in state-registered pesticides, said Jim Britt, a spokesman for the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, which oversees the Board of Pesticide Control.

None of the 56 PFAS compounds are similar in chemical characteristics to the commonly discussed long-chain PFAS, said Britt, like those used to assess the potability of well water. The overall class of manmade chemicals contains at least 9,000.

The PFAS in the state-registered pesticides are not always intended to kill bugs or blight. In many cases, the water-repelling forever chemical is added to help the other chemicals adhere to the plants in the fields even after rain or to facilitate an even distribution of product during application.

Zhou praised Maine for taking proactive steps to reduce the amount of PFAS being introduced into the environment, including pesticides that are sprayed directly on food and inside the home. Maine’s approach should serve as an example to other states, she said.

Maine is currently in the information-gathering phase, requiring manufacturers to answer two yes-or-no PFAS questions as part of a reasonable state phaseout of forever chemicals, said Heather Spalding of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association.

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“The state is working hard to gather information about the extent of the problem and give pesticide manufacturers ample time to reformulate their products so farm families, farm workers and farmland are protected from further PFAS contamination,” Spalding said.

The public has the right to know what they're being exposed to, Spalding said.

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Maine is the first state in the nation to ban pesticides that contain forever chemicals, a law that some, like MOFGA and Defend Our Health, cheer, but others, including the Maine Farm Bureau, worry may have unintended consequences for Maine farmers and consumers.

Earlier this year, Maine Farm Bureau's Julie Ann Smith said some of her members worry the law may hasten the market departure of some pesticide makers who conclude the cost of the testing needed to comply with the reporting mandate outweighs the profits that can be made here.

With their competition eliminated, pesticide makers that stay in the Maine market will probably raise prices, Smith said, adding to the financial burden already facing farmers coping with increasing labor and fertilizer costs. Farmers also are spending money to test fields, crops and water for PFAS.

"There's nobody among us that doesn't want action taken on PFAS, but there's no consensus about what that action should be or when we should do it," Smith told lawmakers on the state agriculture committee in January. "We're breaking new ground here and there's a lot on the line."

Maine usually registers between 11,000 and 13,000 pesticides a year, Britt said. Some manufacturers have not yet registered their pesticides for sale in Maine that have done so in the past, Britt admitted, but said there are many reasons why they may have chosen not to do so.

As for alternatives, Britt noted scientists at the University of Maine Cooperative Extension have been researching alternative pesticide options for Maine's various crop, fruit and livestock sectors. They told lawmakers they wanted to have a list of alternatives ready for the 2030 phaseout.

Maine is on the front lines of tackling PFAS. Last year, after a string of farms connected to a decades-old sludge fertilizer program shut down because of PFAS contamination, Maine became the first U.S. state to ban sludge recycling and PFAS in nonessential products.

To date, Maine has identified 49 PFAS-contaminated farms.

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