

# ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS

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## EPA MOVES TO SHARPLY CURTAIL USE OF MERCURY PESTICIDES

William D. Ruckelshaus, Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, today acted to stop the interstate shipment of nearly all remaining pesticide products containing mercury in an effort to avoid further hazard to human health and contamination of the environment from this source.

In a two-part move, Ruckelshaus ordered the suspension of federal registrations for all alkyl mercury pesticides and all other mercury products applied to laundry fabrics and rice seed, and mixed in marine anti-fouling paints for vessels.

Suspension is the most drastic regulatory measure available to the Environmental Protection Agency.

The order immediately halts all interstate commerce in these products on the grounds that their continued sale would constitute an imminent hazard to the public.

"Alkyl mercury is highly toxic and can accumulate in the brain, causing damage to the nervous system," Ruckelshaus said. "The other suspended products come in direct contact with and can contaminate water resources. Once in the water, they can be converted by biological processes into a more toxic form of mercury whose residues find their way into fish and other aquatic life likely to be consumed by the public."

The order cited the concern for build-up in the environment and food chain. Ruckelshaus said in his order: "To allow a course of conduct today that may create an uncorrectable and highly dangerous situation tomorrow is to engage in environmental brinkmanship."

The alkyl mercury products suspended by the order are registered for fungicidal use on cotton, farm and greenhouse equipment, ornamentals, turf, and on trees and shrubs to control anthracnose,

leaf spots, and blights. They are also used to retard mold and mildew on surfaces and as a wood preservative. Alternative methods of control are available for most of these uses, according to the EPA.

Certain alkyl mercury pesticides used to treat seed were suspended in 1970 by the Federal Government after several New Mexico children were seriously poisoned after eating meat from a hog fed waste seed treated with the chemical.

No attempt will be made by the Government to recall the suspended mercury products already in the hands of distributors or on dealers' shelves because of serious problems related to disposal and storage that a massive recall would create. The Agency pointed out that safe disposal techniques for mercury, particularly in large quantities do not now exist. The safest method of disposal is to proceed with normal use, observing established precautionary procedures, with resulting diffusion in the environment.

In a simultaneous action, the EPA Administrator has given notice of intent to cancel the federal registration of all other mercury pesticide products, including those used in mildew-proofing paint, treatment of logs and lumber to prevent stain and mildew, and for control of stinking smut on wheat, snow mold on golf courses, and leaf stripe disease on barley.

A cancellation notice does not immediately stop interstate commerce in the affected products, as is the case with a suspension order. Rather, it allows manufacturers or users 30 days in which to challenge the cancellation notice itself by filing an administrative appeal. An appeal initiates a scientific review or a public hearing on the cancellation action, during which period the manufacturers can continue to market their products.

Under the law the Environmental Protection Agency must commence administrative action by cancellation whenever a "substantial question of safety" exists with regard to a pesticide.

Last year, over 771,000 pounds of mercury were used in mildew-proofing paint, 137,639 pounds in agricultural products, and as much as 44,000 pounds for treating an estimated 10 billion board feet of logs and lumber. Agricultural use of mercury pesticides declined 33 percent from 1969.

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"Although non-pesticide uses of mercury constitute the major source of environmental contamination, mercurial pesticides account for a significant proportion of such contamination," Ruckelshaus said. "The continued widespread use of such pesticides would raise serious questions of safety to man and the environment."

EPA pesticide officials estimated that approximately 12 products would be suspended and about 750 cancelled as a result of the two orders.

In October, the EPA affirmed the cancellation of three mercury pesticides used to kill algae in swimming pools and water cooling towers after the original cancellation notices had been reviewed by a scientific advisory committee on appeal from the manufacturer, with the committee recommending that the cancellations be sustained.

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