EPA Proposes Partial Ban on Chlorpyrifos: Navigating the Regulatory Shift for Food Producers and Consumers

By Natasha A. Corb

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Recently, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) proposed a rule to revoke most food crop tolerances for chlorpyrifos, a pesticide extensively used in agriculture. This decision comes after the US Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals issued a ruling that criticized EPA for hastily instituting an earlier blanket ban in August 2021. The proposed partial ban allows for its continued use on 11 high-benefit crops, reflecting a compromise between safeguarding public health and supporting agricultural productivity. Notably, this regulatory adjustment highlights the evolving complexities in balancing environmental safety and economic necessity, signaling significant implications for agricultural producers and consumers alike.

Chlorpyrifos: A History of Controversy

Chlorpyrifos has been a contentious pesticide for over a decade due to its potential health risks, particularly for children and pregnant women. Studies have linked high exposure to neurological issues, including tremors, fatigue and developmental delays. In April 2021, the Ninth Circuit ordered EPA to reassess the pesticide's tolerances within 60 days, resulting in a sweeping ban later that year.

The EPA's 2021 final rule revoked tolerances for chlorpyrifos on 100+ food crops, effectively banning its use. Pressed by tight deadlines, the agency opted for an all-encompassing prohibition rather than a nuanced approach. However, the Eighth Circuit's November 2023 decision found this approach insufficient, ruling that EPA failed to adequately consider allowing some safe, high benefit uses to continue. The court pointed to prior cases, including the 2010 decision on carbofuran, where it held that EPA could not arbitrarily revoke all tolerances if some exposures were deemed safe.

Proposed Rule: A Balanced Approach

In response to the Eighth Circuit ruling, EPA's proposed rule reinstates tolerances for chlorpyrifos on 11 crops, including alfalfa, apples, asparagus, citrus, cotton, peaches, soybeans, strawberries, sugar beets, and spring and winter wheat. These crops were identified as having high agricultural value and minimal risk of unsafe exposure when used appropriately.

“The proposed rule reflects EPA's efforts to strike a balance between reducing chlorpyrifos exposure and recognizing its critical role in certain agricultural applications,” said Michael Freedhoff, assistant administrator for the Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention.

This decision aligns with EPA's broader goal of minimizing chemical risks in food while addressing agricultural realities. The agency also emphasized its commitment to ongoing research and public health priorities, noting that an interim decision on chlorpyrifos tolerances is expected by 2026.

Implications for Agricultural Producers

For food producers, EPA's shift from a blanket ban to a more targeted approach is a mixed development. Farmers

relying on chlorpyrifos for pest control on crops like soybeans, sugar beets and citrus can continue its use, ensuring short-term stability in pest management practices. However, producers of crops excluded from the 11 exemptions must now reevaluate their pest control strategies.

This transition may require investment in alternative pesticides or integrated pest management systems, potentially increasing costs. Smaller farms may face challenges adapting to the evolving regulatory landscape. EPA's phased review process also creates uncertainty, as additional restrictions could emerge in the coming years.

Consumer Perspective: Enhanced Safety and Transparency

EPA's proposed rule underscores its commitment to protecting public health, particularly for vulnerable groups such as children and pregnant women. By limiting chlorpyrifos use to crops where it poses minimal risks, the agency aims to reassure consumers about the safety of their food supply.

However, consumers may experience indirect impacts, such as potential price increases for certain crops, as producers adapt to the changing regulatory framework. Transparency in pesticide regulation remains a critical factor in maintaining public trust in the agricultural industry.

Chlorpyrifos and the Global Context

Chlorpyrifos regulation in the US reflects broader global trends in pesticide management. Countries in the European Union have already banned chlorpyrifos in food due to purported health concerns, setting a high standard for chemical safety. In contrast, EPA's partial ban seeks to balance public health priorities with agricultural needs.

This dual approach may influence international trade, particularly for US food exporters. Producers relying on chlorpyrifos must ensure compliance with both domestic regulations and international standards to maintain market access.

Legal and Regulatory Considerations

EPA's proposed rule highlights the importance of thorough regulatory processes and stakeholder engagement. The Eighth Circuit's criticism of the agency's rushed decision-making serves as a reminder that balancing health and economic interests requires careful analysis and transparency.

Legal professionals advising agricultural stakeholders should monitor these developments closely. With EPA's final decision expected by 2026, there are opportunities to participate in public comment periods and shape the future of chlorpyrifos regulation. Proactive compliance planning can also mitigate risks and ensure seamless adaptation to new rules.

Call to Action for Stakeholders

Agricultural producers, industry advocates and legal professionals must engage with EPA's ongoing chlorpyrifos review process to ensure their perspectives are considered. Whether through public comments or consultations with regulatory experts, active participation is key to navigating this complex regulatory environment.

Producers should also begin evaluating alternative pest control strategies to future-proof their operations against potential restrictions. By staying informed and adaptive, stakeholders can turn regulatory challenges into opportunities for innovation and resilience in the agricultural sector.

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