EPA Terminates Research Grants on PFAS Exposure and Reduction in Agriculture

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The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recently terminated over $15 million in grants for research aimed to reduce potential exposure to “forever chemicals,”, i.e., per and poly-fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), from food to protect farmland and farming communities.

On September 4, 2024, the EPA originally awarded funding to several different community-based research projects to study how PFAS exposure impacts farmlands and food supply. The objective of this research focused on (i) how PFAS accumulates in crops and livestock, (ii) the effects of biosolids, compost, and irrigation of water on plant uptake and accumulation, and (iii) different ways to reduce the risks of PFAS contamination in the food supply. In addition to protecting public health, the EPA acknowledged that such research was imperative to ensure farming communities remain viable for years to come.

Part of this funding, approximately $5 million, was awarded to certain research projects conducted by the University of Maine, the Passamaquoddy Tribe at Sipayik, and the Mi'kmaq Nation to develop methods to assist farmers in mitigating PFAS contamination in the food supply chain. These grants addressed several different areas of PFAS research, including the development of rapid field testing to test tribal waters shellfish and fish, to conducting some of the first testing of fiddleheads, basket-making trees and insects living in tainted water.

Nevertheless, just seven and a half months later, the EPA sent termination notices to the grantee recipients, deeming such work as being “no longer consistent with EPA funding priorities”. The grantees will have 30 days from the date of their termination notice to make a showing to the EPA as to how their research and work complies with EPA priorities.

Although PFAS have been used for decades, scientific research and testing regarding PFAS concentrations in foods only began within the last five years. Despite EPA's interim termination of food related PFAS research grants, detection mechanisms and sample evaluations continue to evolve. Hence, it is critical for businesses, manufacturers, suppliers, and entities—in the food industry or otherwise—to keep abreast of new developments to ensure compliance with regulatory standards and guidelines at the local, state, and federal levels.