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NRDC: Overdue Standards Better Protect People from Human Pesticide Tests

WASHINGTON (February 8, 2013) – The Environmental Protection Agency today strengthened federal standards to make it harder for the chemical industry to use people as test subjects in pesticide research that is sent to EPA to help set health protection standards.

“Today the EPA moved to better protect Americans from often unethical and unscientific human testing by pesticide manufacturers,” said Jennifer Sass, senior scientist in the Natural Resources Defense Council’s health and environmental program. “While the new standards do not completely ban human testing, they prohibit the EPA from considering pesticide tests conducted on pregnant women and children. They also protect people by ensuring that the EPA puts sound science at the forefront for whether a human study can be relied upon for setting human health standards.

“Following settlement of a lawsuit brought by NRDC and a coalition of environmental and farmworker advocacy groups, EPA took a step forward today to protect public health.” Attorneys with NRDC, Earthjustice, and Farmworker Justice served as legal counsel for the coalition.

EPA strengthened the standards with new amendments to a 2006 rule, “Protections for Subjects in Human Research.” According to the EPA, the standards are intended to guide third parties including pesticide companies and other research sponsors who want to submit research to the agency involving exposing people to pesticides. The EPA said the new amendments implement National Academy of Sciences recommendations and seek to satisfy EPA’s commitments under a 2010 settlement agreement with NRDC and other groups who challenged the 2006 rule.

NRDC, a coalition of health and environmental advocates, and farmworker protection groups filed a lawsuit against EPA in 2006 agency seeking to prohibit EPA’s reliance on these unethical experiments that often led to weakened pesticide safety standards. NRDC claimed that its 2006 rule violated a law Congress passed a year earlier requiring strict ethical and scientific protections for pesticide testing on humans.

“Some of the worst scientific reports I have read are industry-funded pesticide studies where no more than a handful of adults are dosed with a toxic pesticide, and then the companies try to argue away complaints of headaches, nausea, and even vomiting,” said Sass. “In one experiment, the people tested were even told that the chemical was a medicine instead of a pesticide.”

“The pesticide industry has used these unethical experiments to argue for weaker pesticide safety standards. We hope that the new regulations will result in greater protections for those who are most exposed to pesticides, particularly farmworkers and their families.” said Bruce Goldstein, President of Farmworker Justice.

The 2006 lawsuit was brought by the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, Migrant Clinicians Network, NRDC, Pesticide Action Network North America, United Farm Workers, Pinos y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United) and the San Francisco Bay Area Physicians for Social Responsibility.

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The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) is an international nonprofit environmental organization with more than 1.3 million members and online activists. Since 1970, our lawyers, scientists, and other environmental specialists have worked to protect the world's natural resources, public health, and the environment. NRDC has offices in New York City, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Livingston, Montana, and Beijing. Visit us at www.nrdc.org and follow us on Twitter @NRDC.

Farmworker Justice, www.farmworkerjustice.org, in Washington, D.C., is a nonprofit organization that seeks to empower migrant and seasonal farmworkers to improve their living and working conditions, immigration status, health, occupational safety and access to justice.