

## **Punjab Bans 20 Pesticides as Environmentalists Urge India-Wide Action**

By Madhur Singh

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- List of pesticides designated hazardous by the World Health Organization
- Off-label use, overuse, misuse common across India, activists say
- Federal government working on new pesticides legislation

The sale and use of 20 pesticides, including five considered extremely hazardous by the World Health Organization, has been banned by the agrarian northern Indian state of Punjab.

The Jan. 30 order by Punjab's Department of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare said the sale of the 20 pesticides is to be discontinued immediately, and no new licenses for sale were to be issued after Feb. 1.

A range of Indian manufacturers will be affected by this order, but of the large multinational pesticide companies, only BASF produces one of these chemicals, thiophanate-methyl. The company did not respond to a request for comment.

### **Activism**

Environmental activists said the national government should move forward with such a ban as well.

"If a state like Punjab, which is a high pesticide user state and dependent on pesticides, acts in the interest of public health, it is incumbent on the Central government to take necessary steps to eliminate sale of highly toxic pesticides in the entire country," Chandra Bhushan, deputy director general of Delhi-based think tank Centre for Science and Environment, told Bloomberg Environment Jan. 31.

Amit Khurana, senior program manager for food safety and toxins at the centre, told Bloomberg Environment Jan. 31 that a national ban is needed because thousands of farmers are being poisoned each year.

The most recent was in October 2017 in the western Maharashtra state, where nearly 35 farmers died and hundreds sickened, reportedly from inhaling toxic pesticides while they were spraying.

Pesticide makers say such incidents occur mostly due to misuse.

"[A]ll pesticides are actually safe if used as recommended, and often misuse of the pesticides is known to be the cause of concern and not the product itself," Vipin Saini, executive director of the Agro Chem Federation of India, told Bloomberg Environment Feb. 1.

The 20 banned pesticides include phosphamidon, methomyl, phorate, triazophos and monocrotophos—all categorized as Class I pesticides. Also banned are trichlorofon, benfuracarb, dicofol, thiophanate-methyl, endosulfan, bifenthrin, carbosulfan, chlorfenapyr, dazomet, diflubenzuron, fenitrothion, metaldehyde, kasugamycin, etofenprox, and alachlor.

### **Punjab Makes the First Move**

The Punjab government acted after six months of consultation between the Punjab State Farmers' Commission and Punjab Agricultural University, Ajay Vir Jakhar, chairperson of the commission, told Bloomberg Environment Feb. 2.

The university—known for agricultural research and education of farmers—investigated pesticides that Jakhar described as "spurious and unapproved" that were being sold and used in the state and identified cheaper and more effective alternatives before deciding on the ban, he said.

The order follows a December 2015 Anupam Verma Report from a national panel. The report was based on a decision by the national registrar of pesticides to ban 13 of the chemicals and phase out six from a list of 66 that were already banned, restricted, and withdrawn from use in one or more countries.

Pesticides banned by the registrar—the Central Insecticides Board and Registered Committee—from the beginning of this year include benomyl, carbaryl, diazinon, and fenarimol.

Six chemicals are to be phased out nationwide by 2020: alachlor, dichlorvos, phorate, phosphamidon, triazophos, and trichlorfon.

Punjab has gone ahead with banning alachlor, phorate, phosphamidon, and triazophos before the federal government's 2020 deadline.

The farmers' commission, Jakhar said, has also recommended creating a compulsory online registry of pesticides in which all sales and use would have to be logged. That way Punjab Agricultural University scientists would be able to advise farmers on the timing, method, and quantity of pesticides to use.

Under existing rules, the government can only restrict sale of a pesticide for up to 90 days, Saini of the Agro Chem Federation said, adding that his federation would take up the matter with the state authorities.

### **Pesticide Poisonings**

Even after the 2020 deadline, India will continue to allow the use of several Class I pesticides, which presently account for 30 percent of the total used in the country, Khurana, of the Centre for Science and Environment told Bloomberg Environment Jan. 31. Eighteen Class I pesticides are allowed for use in India, he said. The Anupam Verma committee had reviewed 11 of those and recommended that four be banned by 2021.

"The recommendations of the Verma committee are inadequate and the government actions so far are not in line with the urgency and scale of the problem," Khurana said.

Most analysts agree there are deeper and more wide-ranging problems with India's pesticide management, including poor oversight and implementation of existing rules, procedures, and law, which promote misuse, overuse, and off-label use.

"Deaths and illnesses due to pesticides can be avoided if we can urgently fix some of the crucial gaps in our regulations and improve its enforcement," Bhushan said.

For instance, a 2013 review of 11 important crops in India—wheat, paddy, apple, mango, potato, cauliflower, black pepper, cardamom, tea, sugarcane, and cotton—showed that the pesticide recommendations made by state agriculture universities, agriculture departments, and other boards for a crop are not the same as the pesticides registered for those crops with the national pesticides registrar, Bhushan said.

### **New Legislation**

A Pesticides Management Bill was proposed 10 years ago to address some of these problems but was never passed and enacted. Work has begun on a new measure to replace the existing Insecticides Act of 1968, although its draft has not been made public.

Environmental activists and one congressional researcher said any new legislation must specify criteria for classifying pesticides as misbranded, sub-standard, or spurious, and what action is to be taken in each case. Provisions for a pesticides registry are a must, as are norms for allowable residue in crops and products.

Jakhar adds that the bill also must hold pesticide companies responsible for selling substandard, spurious, and expired products even if these are legally manufactured by their licensees. The current law holds licensees alone responsible, letting the bigger companies off the hook.

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