

Look What's Out There

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Activists More to Fear than Pesticides

As public health officials consider spraying pesticides to control the mosquito-borne West Nile virus, anti-pesticide activists claim that spraying devastates birds and other wildlife. But such claims should be viewed with skepticism. It seems that West Nile virus and other natural factors may pose much greater threats than spraying. The Centers for Disease Control reports that West Nile has killed birds from at least 138 bird species, including some endangered species. In the Midwest last year, 400 great-horned owls were found dead from West Nile. Researchers estimate that for each dead bird reported, there are probably 100 to 1,000 unreported cases, which means there could have been as many as 40,000 to 400,000 great-horned owl deaths from West Nile last year. Still, environmentalists claim that there is clear evidence that the pesticides are a far greater risk to birds. They claimed back in 2001 that data from New York State showed that more birds were dying from "toxins" like pesticides than from West Nile. But science writer Steven Milloy obtained state data in 2001 that showed the toxins that affected the birds in this sample were mostly naturally occurring. According to Milloy, the New York State analysis of 3,216 dead birds found that natural diseases and toxins caused the majority of the bird deaths (1,263 from West Nile virus and 1,100 from botulinum). Meanwhile, the data included 219 pesticide-related bird deaths, of which 30 were from intentional poisonings of pest birds and 100 were from illegal use of pesticides for intentional killing of birds. Twenty-seven bird deaths resulted from lawn care products.

More recently, the Audubon Society says that data collected by New York State in subsequent years from a sample of 80,000 dead birds shows that pesticides, primarily lawn products, are killing the majority of birds. Yet New York has not released the data in any report, nor has anything been peer-reviewed. This "majority" of such toxin-related deaths may again include natural toxins, like botulinum, and it is not clear that the data they obtained was for all 80,000 birds.

Unfortunately, the data on bird deaths from all sources isn't particularly clear, despite Audubon's suggestions to the contrary. The researcher who conducts New York bird pathology (who reportedly gave the data to the Audubon Society) has told the press that he doubts spraying will do much harm to birds--at least not as much as does the virus. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency asserts that spraying poses a negligible risk to birds. In addition to birds, activists also say that aquatic life is at grave risk. When a massive lobster die-off occurred in Long Island Sound in 1999, environmentalists and lobstermen claimed that New York City's malathion spraying had reached the waters and caused the die-off. Yet the die-off began before New York State sprayed, and several years of federally-funded research hasn't found a definitive link to the pesticides.

The University of Connecticut's Dr. Richard French explained in a 2001 report: "There is no quantitative evidence of pesticide toxicity ... All the indications based on pathological evaluation of the American Lobster in LIS (Long Island Sound), suggest that the mass mortality of lobsters in 1999 was the effect of a natural disease."

Long Island comprises some of the farthest

southern reaches for these lobsters, and unusually warm waters in years leading up to and into 1999 seem to have created natural environmental stresses that make the shellfish more susceptible to parasites and other diseases.

In any case, New York's regional problem has not stopped the industry from growing. According to figures from the National Marine Fisheries Service, the biggest national lobster catch occurred in 1999--the year New York suffered its massive die-off. The data show that since 1950, the lobster catch has increased through the decades, with some years dipping only to be followed by the continued march upward. New York's lobster population is more variable.

Before the 1990s, average annual lobster catch for all the years between 1950 and 1989 totaled less than a million pounds a year. The number of lobsters caught ballooned in the 1990s, amounting to more than three million pounds by 1992 and then reaching a pinnacle of nearly nine and a half million pounds in 1996. The yields for 1999 (seven million pounds) and 2000 (three million) are still higher than any year before 1990. Debates about pesticide spraying aren't going away, and anti-pesticide activists will continue to make unsupported claims to advance their cause. But much of what they say isn't verified by the facts.

<http://www.cei.org/gencon/019,03591.cfm>

(by Angela Logomasini, Logomasini Op-Ed for Scripps Howard, August 5, 2003)

Pesticide News

* The World Health Organization's World Health Report for 2000 identifies its top ten global disease and health risk factors. Pesticides are not included. The top ten are: underweight (1), unsafe sex (2), hypertension (3), tobacco use (4), alcohol consumption (5), unsafe water, poor sanitation and hygiene (6), iron deficiency (7), indoor smoke from solid fuels (8), high cholesterol (9), and obesity (10). (CropLife America *Spotlight*, 7/18/03).

* A recent ABC News poll has found that one-third of U.S. consumers seek to avoid buying foods that have been bioengineered or have come from livestock treated with antibiotics or hormones. Also, if biotech food were labeled, more than half the 1,024 adults in the telephone survey say they'd avoid it, while 92 percent favored mandatory labeling. The poll also found gains in the belief that biotech food is safe to eat - up 11 percentage points from two years ago to 46 percent. (CropLife America *Spotlight*, 7/18/03).

* On July 7, the FDACS registered the fungicide Omega® (fluazinam) for control of blight and mold on potatoes and peanuts. The EPA registration number for the ISK Biosciences product is 71512-1. (FDACS PREC August Agenda).

* On July 10, the FDACS registered the harvest aid/defoliant ET® Herbicide/Defoliant (pyraflufen-ethyl) for terrestrial use on cotton, potato, field corn, soybean, and noncrop weed control. The EPA registration number for the Nichino America product is 71711-7. (FDACS PREC August Agenda).

* On July 15, the FDACS issued a letter stating that the EPA had issued a specific exemption under the provisions of Section 18 of FIFRA, for the use of Topsin® fungicide (thiophanate-methyl) for control of white mold on fruiting vegetables (tomato, pepper, and eggplant). The exemption will expire on March 31, 2004. The products acceptable for use carry the EPA registration numbers 4581-408, 73545-8, or 4581-377. The material can only be applied by ground application at a rate of 0.7 lb ai/A (1 lb/A of product) and a maximum of four applications per crop may be made at 7 to 14 day intervals. The crop limit is 2.8 lb ai/A. The REI is 12 hours and PHI is 2 days. Up to 43,800 acres of tomato, 21,600 acres of pepper, and 1,600 acres of eggplant may be treated. (FDACS letter of 7/15/03).