

## Study of Pesticides and Children Stirs Protests

Staffers Fear EPA Project Endangers Participants

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An Environmental Protection Agency proposal to study young children's exposure to pesticides has sparked a flurry of internal agency protests, with several career officials questioning whether the survey will harm vulnerable infants and toddlers.

The EPA announced this month that it was launching a two-year investigation, partially funded by the American Chemical Council, of how 60 children in Duval County, Fla., absorb pesticides and other household chemicals. The chemical industry funding initially prompted some environmentalists to question whether the study would be biased, and some rank-and-file agency scientists are now questioning whether the plan will exploit financially strapped families.

In exchange for participating for two years in the Children's Environmental Exposure Research Study, which involves infants and children up to age 3, the EPA will give each family using pesticides in their home \$970, some children's clothing and a camcorder that parents can keep.

EPA officials in states such as Georgia and Colorado fired off e-mail messages to each other this week suggesting the study lacked safeguards to ensure that low-income families would not be swayed into exposing their children to hazardous chemicals in exchange for money and high-tech gadgetry. Pesticide exposure has been linked to neurological problems, lung damage and birth defects.

Suzanne Wuerthele, the EPA's regional toxicologist in Denver, wrote her colleagues on Wednesday that after reviewing the project's design, she feared poor families would not understand the dangers associated with pesticide exposure.

"It is important that EPA behaves ethically, consistently, and in a way that engenders public health. Unless these issues are resolved, it is likely that all three goals will be compromised, and the agency's reputation will suffer," she wrote in an e-mail obtained by The Washington Post. "EPA researchers will not tell participants that using pesticides always entails some risk, and not using pesticides will reduce that risk to zero."

Troy Pierce, a life scientist in the EPA's Atlanta-based pesticides section, wrote in a separate e-mail: "This does sound like it goes against everything we recommend at EPA concerning use of [pesticides] related to children. Paying families in Florida to have their homes routinely treated with pesticides is very sad when we at EPA know that [pesticide management] should always be used to protect children."

Linda S. Sheldon, acting administrator for the human exposure and atmospheric sciences division of the EPA's Office of Research and Development, said the agency would educate families participating in the study and inform them if their children's urine showed risky levels of pesticides. She said it was crucial for the agency to study small children because so little is known about how their bodies absorb harmful chemicals.

"We are developing the scientific building blocks that will allow us to protect children," Sheldon said, adding that the study design was reviewed by five independent panels of academics, officials of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and representatives of the Duval County Health Department.

Families can remain in the study even if they stop using pesticides, Sheldon said, as long as they were using them before the experiment started. It was unlikely that any family would volunteer for the study out of financial need, she added, because researchers will require parents to invest time in monitoring their children's activities and diet.

"Nobody can go into this study just for that amount of money," Sheldon said.

R. Alta Charo, a professor of bioethics at the University of Wisconsin at Madison's law and medical schools who co-authored a National Academy of Sciences report last year on the use of pesticides for research, said EPA officials were struggling with how to balance the need to protect the individual child's interests against the goal of pursuing a broader scientific agenda. While she said the agency's approach was reasonable, Charo said it did raise ethical questions.

"Where is the line between enticement and a godfather offer" that impoverished families would find hard to refuse, Charo said. "That is really troubling. We make these decisions over and over in public policy. This is one of those moments."

Several EPA officials, all of whom asked not to be identified for fear of retaliation, also questioned why the agency removed the study design and its recruitment flier from the EPA's Web site once some scientists started to complain about the project. Sheldon said the agency is rewriting how it portrays the research.

"We removed it so we could modify it, so it would make more sense," she said.