

School Pesticide Monitor

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Beyond Pesticides / National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides
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EPA Allows Red Cross Symbol on Pesticide Products; Groups Say Label Misleads on Consumer Safety and Violates Law

Environmental and public health advocates have petitioned the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and asked all state agencies regulating pesticide use to stop marketing pesticide products with a new label that displays the Red Cross symbol because it violates federal pesticide law and conveys a false sense of product safety. Clorox says that it will donate up to \$1 million to the Red Cross when people purchase products with soon-to-be released pesticide labels that include the Red Cross symbol on the label.

Beyond Pesticides, Pesticide Action Network North America, Center for Environmental Health, American Bird Conservancy, Pesticide Education Project, Strategic Counsel on Corporate Accountability, Environmental Health Fund, The Endocrine Disruption Exchange, Natural Resources Defense Council, The Maryland Pesticide Network, Washington Toxics Coalition, and Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticide petitioned EPA to immediately rescind its approval of pesticide labeling changes as part of a cause-related marketing relationship between the Clorox Company and the American Red Cross.

Currently in question is the use of the Red Cross symbol on Clorox Company products. Groups warn that the use of the Red Cross symbol implies an endorsement of the product and may also imply an endorsement of its safety to users, which may mislead users and contribute to product misuse. The Red Cross symbol itself internationally represents (largely due to the Geneva Convention's adoption of its use) neutrality, humanitarianism, and safety and denotes medical aid. However, the EPA registration process and the product, which bears the EPA approved label, should not be confused with any of these principles and qualities.

While Clorox products are often mistakenly viewed as safe chemical products without potential hazards by childcare centers and others, they do contain toxic materials that must be handled very carefully. Some of the products require that they be diluted with water and warn that they can cause irritation of the eyes, skin, and respiratory and gastrointestinal tract. Exposure to high levels can result in severe corrosive damage to the eyes, skin, and respiratory and gastrointestinal tissues. The label on some Clorox products warns, "Although not expected, heart conditions or chronic respiratory problems such as asthma, chronic bronchitis or obstructive lung disease may be aggravated by exposure to high concentrations of vapor or mist." Some of the products are suspected neurotoxicants.

"While EPA should ensure severe caution when using pesticides, a label displaying the Red Cross symbol sends a misleading message that will undoubtedly result in greater product misuse because of a failure to heed important product warnings," said Jay Feldman, executive director of Beyond Pesticides. "EPA needs to step in and correct this violation of federal law. If Clorox is genuinely altruistic, I'm sure the company can find another way to support the Red Cross."

Above and beyond the symbolism and misrepresentation associated with the use of this label, EPA's decision to allow Clorox to label its pesticide products with the Red Cross symbol is a blatant violation of its own guidelines, which reads as follows: "If the draft label under review contains graphics or symbols that violate FIFRA...or the applicable regulations e.g., false and misleading...then the label reviewer must advise the registrant to remove these from the label. Examples have

included... Symbols implying safety or nontoxicity, such as a Red Cross or a medical seal of approval (caduceus)."

The inherent danger is that misleading the public about pesticides can result in harm to consumers who either do not take the time to read pesticide labels or who cannot read or comprehend labels (e.g. non-English speaking citizens, visually impaired persons, children).

Activists also point out that a decision that would reverse the agency's policy should have been proposed openly and made available for public comment. Instead, the public is only now learning of this decision, months after EPA accepted the labels in question.

The primary concern groups have with this issue is the precedent that this decision sets. EPA's own notes indicated that the agency is anticipating future similar situations. Due to the grave results of pesticide misuse and the need to protect children's health, it is not socially responsible to stand by and let a dangerous precedent be set, nonetheless a precedent that directly violates an EPA policy designed to protect the environment and public health.

TAKE ACTION: Contact EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson at 202-564-4700 (phone), 202-501-1450 (fax), or send an email to johnson.stephen@epa.gov and tell him EPA needs to reconsider the implications of allowing the Red Cross symbol to be used on pesticide labels.



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How to Choose Green Cleaning Products

Many sanitizers, disinfectants, and other cleaning products used in schools and in homes contain chemicals that can be irritating or even toxic, especially to children. A study published in the October 2003 issue of the journal *Environmental Health Perspectives* found that working youth face much higher safety and health risks from occupational exposure to disinfectants than adults. In fact, teens were four times more likely to become ill from exposure to disinfectants than adults. Additionally, a 2002 U.S. Geological Survey study of contaminants in U.S. stream water, 69 percent of streams sampled contained persistent detergent metabolites, and 66 percent contained disinfectants.

Like with other pesticides, disinfectants can contaminate indoor air and result in serious health effects. Schools should take steps to stay clean and healthy without the use of toxic cleaners. Some states are leading the way towards non-toxic cleaners. A 2005 vote by the New York State Senate now requires New York schools to use green cleaning products. The bill, Senate Bill 5435, signed into law on August 23, 2005 by New York Governor George Pataki, requires the procurement and use of environmentally sensitive cleaning and maintenance products in schools.

Ingredients to Avoid:

- **Triclosan:** commonly used antibacterial agent that pollutes waterways, may contribute to antibacterial resistance, and can react to chlorine in tap water to form carcinogens
- **Chlorine (also called sodium hypochlorite):** used as a whitening agent, can irritate the lungs and eyes and can become toxic organochlorines in waterways.
- **Phosphates:** soften water for detergents but pollute waterways and can cause algae blooms in our waterways, which can kill off fish populations
- **Alkylphenol ethoxylates (APEs):** commonly used in detergents and disinfectants, are suspected endocrine disruptors.
- **Ammonia:** poisonous when swallowed, irritating to respiratory passages when inhaled, can burn the skin.
- **Diethanolamine (DEA):** suspected carcinogen and suspected kidney and neuro-toxin
- **Fragrance:** frequently contains phthalates, chemicals linked to reproductive abnormalities, liver cancer, and asthma.
- **Sodium hydroxide:** extremely irritating to eyes, nose and throat and can burn tissues on contact.
- **Sodium lauryl sulfate:** a common sudsing agent, can penetrate the skin and cause contact dermatitis (skin irritation)

Sources for Buying Green Cleaners:

- Green Seal (www.greenseal.org), a national not for profit environmental labeling and consumer education organization, certifies green cleaners.
- Consumers Union, which publishes Consumer Reports magazine and has been testing products since 1936, recently launched a green-products Web site (www.greenerchoices.org).
- EPA's guide to Green Cleaning: <http://www.epa.gov/epp/pubs/products/cleaner.htm>

Make Your Own Green Cleaner

For a cheap, safe alternative, make your own cleaner! Safe, effective cleaners can be made out of common household ingredients like vinegar, baking soda, lemon juice, and plain old soap and water. For more information on making household cleaners, do a quick search on websites like www.care2.com, www.grist.org, and www.worldwatch.org, or check out the books *Clean and Green* by Annie Berthold-Bond.

Sources: Worldwatch Institute, *The Green Guide*, Scorecard