

Speaking Out in Defense of a Conservation Tool

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Weeds must have a lot of friends in Washington. That's one way to interpret the Obama administration's bizarre decision to question what may be the most proven crop-protection product on the planet.

Atrazine is a tremendous tool for killing weeds. I started using it around the time it was first introduced, more than 50 years ago. Back then, Dwight Eisenhower was president, Alaska was becoming the 49th state, and the hot new show on television was a black-and-white series called "The Twilight Zone."

Rod Serling used to begin "The Twilight Zone" by saying, "You're traveling through another dimension, a dimension not only of sight and sound but of mind."

That's precisely how I feel when I listen to the complaints about atrazine--like I've just stepped into an alternate universe where logic makes no sense, science explains nothing, and the Chicago Cubs win the World Series every year.

Someone needs to cue that eerie theme song.

Back in the real world, atrazine is an utterly conventional product that farmers put on about half of America's corn crop, two-thirds of its sorghum acreage, and 90 percent of its sugar cane fields. It's a completely safe herbicide that helps boost yields and protects the environment.

Over the course of more than half a century, atrazine has become one of the most studied herbicides in the world--not just by private industry, but also by public-health regulators. It has secured endorsements from the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and a wide range of international panels. Farmers in more than 60 countries rely on it for fighting weeds.

In 2006, the Environmental Protection Agency – which has 6,000 scientific studies of atrazine in its files - finished a 12-year review that included tens of thousands of public comments. During this re-approval process, the EPA said that this type of herbicide threatens "no harm" to anybody.

The WHO is so convinced of its safety that it has placed atrazine in the same cancer-risk category as rubbing alcohol and tea.

So why has the Obama administration decided to question atrazine? They appear to be taking their cue from hard-line environmental groups who demonize atrazine to meet the financial objectives of their fear-mongering fundraising campaigns. With the zealotry of fanatics, they continue to say that this indispensable tool of modern farming is somehow a menace. They are engaged in a quixotic quest to wish away a mountain of hard evidence.

To make matters worse, trial lawyers have gotten into the act. They've filed a class-action lawsuit based on junk science, in the hopes of scoring a payday that will empty the pockets of

farmers who are guilty of nothing more than using a safe product that has enjoyed the federal government's seal of approval for longer than most Americans have been alive.

The sad irony is that if this alliance of green extremists and opportunistic lawyers succeeds, it will deliver a serious blow to the environment because atrazine has become an important instrument of conservation.

One of the unheralded benefits of atrazine has been the widespread adoption of no-till agriculture, which fights soil erosion, saves water, and removes greenhouse gases from the atmosphere. Without crop-protection devices such as atrazine, farmers have to fight weeds through the constant churning of the soil. Intensive plowing produces massive amounts of sediment runoff. Moisture evaporates rather than remains locked in the ground. Tractors make more frequent passes over fields, increasing the carbon footprint.

The Department of Energy, in fact, has identified no-till agriculture as an effective weapon in the fight against global warming. Cost-conscious farmers appreciate this benefit of atrazine if only because it reduces their fuel bills--a savings that is passed on to consumers.

Rather than dreaming up new regulations on proven products that don't need them, the government should devote additional resources to helping farmers grow more food. It might quicken the approval process for cutting-edge GM crops, for instance.

As it stands, the surreal attack on atrazine threatens the prosperity of farms across the United States--not unlike weeds that try to suck the life from crop fields.

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