Study Spells Trouble for Pesticide Industry

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U.S. pesticide manufacturers may be in for some rough waters in the wake of a federal study that found trace amounts of the toxic products in most U.S. streams and rivers. After a 10-year nationwide sampling of waterways, the U.S. Geological Survey said: “Pesticides are typically present throughout the year in most streams in urban and agricultural areas of the nation but are less common in ground water.” The study, which was conducted from 1992 to 2001, concluded that pesticides detected in U.S. waterways are seldom at concentrations likely to affect humans. But it found that in many streams draining urban and agricultural areas, “pesticides were found at concentrations that may affect aquatic life or fish-eating wildlife.” The EPA will use the data in its exposure and risk assessments for regulating the use of pesticides. It is in those EPA risk assessments that the U.S. pesticides industry is likely to face a tough fight over the next few years.
On its face, the report suggests that trace amounts of pesticides found in streams and rivers pose no threat to human health even if those levels may affect aquatic life. CropLife America, the Washington, D.C.-based trade group for U.S. pesticides producers, said the report is a validation of current pesticide use restrictions. “We applaud and welcome the geological report,” said Alan Noe, communications director for CropLife, “but we also note that simply detecting trace amounts of pesticides in water does not equate to a problem.” However, environmental groups are gearing up for a major drive against pesticide use, citing the report as a clarion call. Jay Feldman, spokesman for environmental group Beyond Pesticides, said the report should trigger an immediate change in EPA risk assessment standards. “Given the widespread nature of this contamination in all of our rivers, lakes and streams, we have a serious public health threat that has to be addressed immediately by reduced pesticide use in agriculture and in the home and garden. This is where the contamination begins,” he said, arguing that the EPA should immediately tighten restrictions on pesticide use.

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