

WILDEARTH GUARDIANS

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John Stulp, Commissioner
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Re: Dog poisoned in Grand Junction by Strychnine; Request for Immediate Investigation

Dear Director Himmelbauer and Commissioner Stulp:

Today's Denver Post and Grand Junction Daily Sentinel reported that a dog had been killed by strychnine poison that allegedly had been placed in meat and used to target coyotes. The dog died at a veterinary clinic. (See: http://www.denverpost.com/headlines/ci_8690675 and http://www.gjsentinel.com/news/content/news/stories/2008/03/24/032508_1b_poison_meat.html).

Strychnine is regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and under the Federal Insecticide and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA) and agreements with between the EPA the Colorado Department of Agriculture (CDA), both agencies have the authority to investigate this matter.

We hope that the CDA will do so immediately because this toxicant, when used illegally, could be considered a bioterrorism agent under the Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Act. Grand Junction has already experienced similar problems: In 2001, approximately 30 pets were illegally poisoned by Compound 1080 in Grand Junction, Colorado and the investigating police officer, David Palacios, who handled the poisoned animals experienced, "flu like symptoms, only 10 times worse" (Lofholm 4/12/01). The Grand Junction police and FBI were never able to apprehend the culprit who ultimately dumped the poison into the local sewer system (Lofholm 3/15/01; Lofholm 4/12/01).

The EPA rates strychnine as a Category 1 toxicant, the most acute class (EPA, 1996a). It affects neurons, switching off muscles, and resulting in severe and painful convulsions until breathing is stopped (Center for Disease Control, 2003). Strychnine is a bitter, odorless, crystalline, and highly toxic powder. It comes naturally from the plant *Strychnos nux vomica*, which grows in southern Asia and Australia (Center for Disease Control May 14, 2003). FIFRA requires that strychnine be used only in a manner that could only kill targeted species because it will kill anything that ingests a lethal dose.

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In 1972, strychnine was banned as use for killing mammalian carnivores (EPA, 1996b). In 1988, a federal district court judge banned the above-ground use of strychnine because the EPA and Department of Interior could not show that this substance could be kept away from protected species, especially bald eagles, wolves, grizzly bears, migratory birds and other wildlife. Despite an appeal brought by the EPA, Department of Interior, and American Farm Bureau, the appellate court upheld the lower court's ruling with regards to the Endangered Species Act, but not the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (EPA, 1996b). After the courts' decisions, however, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued several biological opinions (i.e. on black footed-ferrets and bald eagles), which essentially left the above-ground usage injunction in place (EPA, 1996b).

The EPA's re-registration eligibility decision for strychnine claims that its use profile is for pocket gophers only (EPA 1996a). It can be used to protect orchards, agricultural crops, for forestry, and outside of residential dwellings (EPA 1996b). The USDA-Wildlife Services 1994 Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) suggests that this agency uses strychnine for all below-ground rodents such as gophers, prairie dogs, and ground squirrels (Appendix P, p. 220). In plain language: It is not legal to use strychnine to poison coyotes.

The PEIS claims that strychnine is the only compound that can cause "significant" secondary hazards to raptors (Appendix P, 11). Some non-target species such as chipmunks and deer mice can ingest strychnine, die above ground, and cause secondary poisonings to both terrestrial and aerial species (Arjo et al. 2006). Secondary poisonings could kill cats, dogs, and possibly the following protected species: ocelot, jaguarundi, northern aplomado falcon, bald eagle, and peregrine, wolves (234). Strychnine baits are directly lethal to songbirds, and cause secondary poisoning to raptors (Knopper et al. 2006). The EPA found that strychnine is highly toxic to birds, small mammals, and some fish (EPA, 1996b). Threatened and endangered species have also been killed by strychnine. That list includes Attwater's greater prairie chickens, burrowing owls, whooping cranes, bald eagles, peregrine falcons, northern aplomado falcons, jaguarundi, ocelots, and wolves (USDA-ADC 1994).

In sum, strychnine, even if used only below-ground can have deleterious effects on non-target species and cause secondary poisonings. Given the enormous toxicity issues with strychnine, its use should be suspended. In the meantime, we hope that CDA will ensure that a thorough investigation of this matter goes forward because of the seriousness involved in this issue as we have outlined here.

Sincerely yours,



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cc:

Jane Quimby and John Piatanese,
Federal Bureau of Investigation, Grand Junction

Bibliography:

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