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# Oregon (And The EPA) Failed To Ban This Toxic Pesticide

by [Erin Ross \(/contributor/erin-ross/\)](#) [Follow](#) OPB July 22, 2019 3:30 p.m. | Updated: July 23, 2019 8:51 a.m.

The Environmental Protection Agency chose last week not to ban the agricultural pesticide chlorpyrifos, which has been associated with developmental problems in children and health conditions in adults.

Oregon lawmakers, anticipating the Trump administration would reverse course on Obama-era plans to restrict the pesticide's use on crops, introduced their own legislation (<https://www.opb.org/news/article/pesticide-ban-oregon-chlorpyrifos-committee/>) to regulate regulating chlorpyrifos at the state level.

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## Oregon Lawmakers Consider Ban On Pesticide Chlorpyrifos

“We had an inkling that the administration wouldn't go forward with the ban, so we needed to take action as a state,” said Oregon state Sen. Michael Dembrow, D-Portland, who sponsored one of the two bills.

But when the Oregon Legislature adjourned last month, both bills were still languishing in committee, having failed to reach the governor for her signature into law.

After the bill failed to pass, Dembrow said, he was counting on the EPA ban to come through. “I was very disappointed to see the news about the EPA, because that was kind of our last hope for getting something done quickly about chlorpyrifos.”

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Chlorpyrifos has been banned for indoor use since 2000 after studies found that use in apartment buildings was linked to decreased IQ in children and lower birth weights. It seems to affect fetuses, infants, and children most strongly, though high doses have

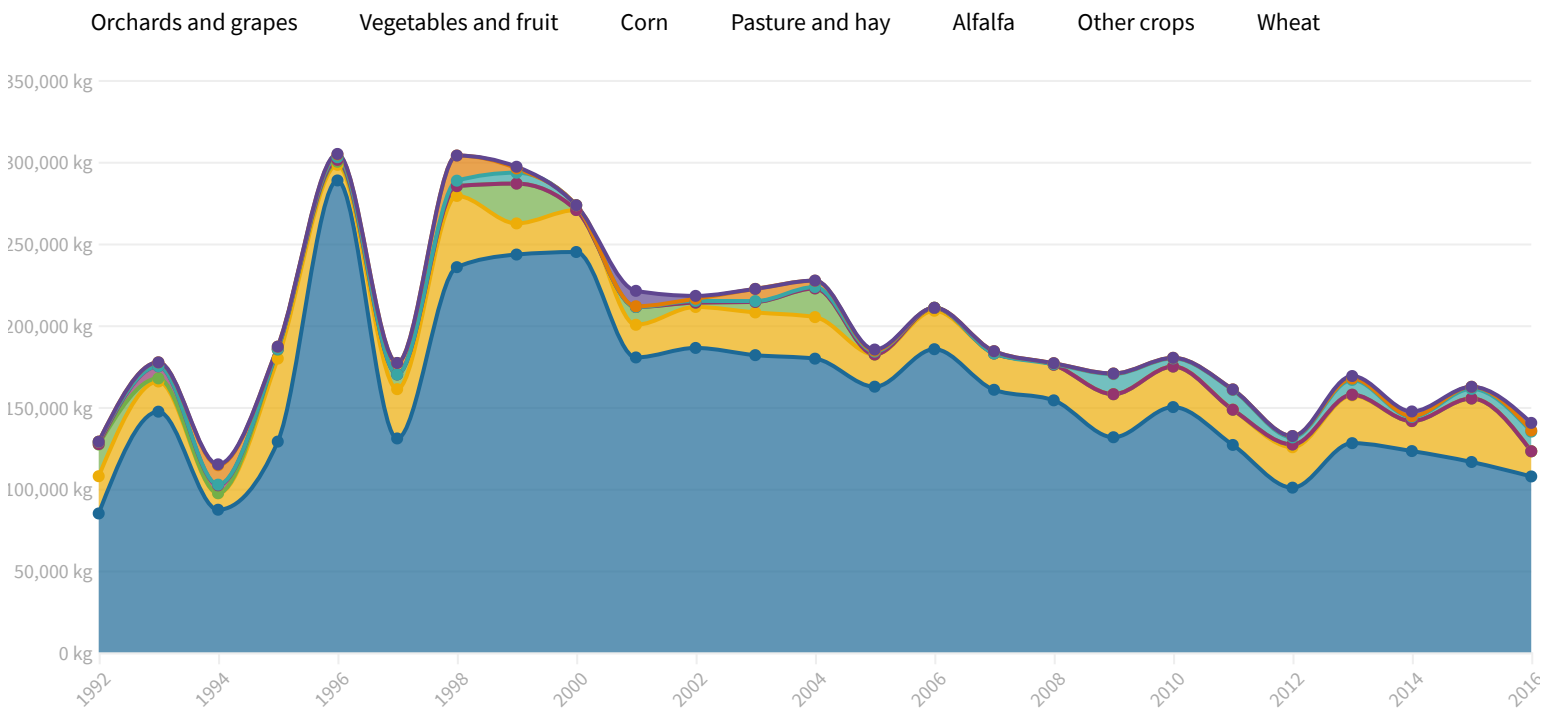
led to poisoning in adults.

“People are very, very concerned about the human health impacts, and those are paramount,” says Lisa Arkin, executive director of the anti-pesticide group Beyond Toxics, “But also this chemical is devastating in the environment. It kills not only insects that might be on Christmas trees; it’s killing every beneficial insect.”

But banning the pesticide outdoors has been met with opposition by the farm industry.

## Chlorpyrifos Use In The Pacific Northwest

Low-end estimates for Oregon and Washington show chlorpyrifos use spiked in the early 2000s, before gradually falling to rates similar to the early 1990s. Orchards and grapes remain the dominant use.



✶ A Flourish data visualisation ([https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/181975/?utm\\_source=showcase&utm\\_campaign=visualisation/181975](https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/181975/?utm_source=showcase&utm_campaign=visualisation/181975))

Tony Schick, OPB. Source: US Geological Survey Pesticide National Synthesis Project. (<https://water.usgs.gov/nawqa/pnsp/usage/maps/county-level/>)

Chlorpyrifos is sprayed on leafy greens and alfalfa in Oregon. It's also sprayed on grass fields and heavily used by Christmas tree farms (<https://www.opb.org/news/article/toxic-pesticide-christmas-tree-harmful-children/>). The pesticide is also still sprayed on apple farms in Washington (<https://www.opb.org/news/article/washington-orchards-northwest-pesticides-chlorpyrifos/>).

Oregon's attempt to ban the pesticide was met with opposition from the farm industry, Dembrow said. "We got big pushback, not surprisingly, from the farm bureau. And a number of individual farmers and Christmas tree farmers did, too."

A lot of that pushback was led by Oregonians for Food and Shelter, a pro-pesticides lobbying group based in Salem.

"A lot of the crops in Oregon don't have an alternative product that's registered to deal with the pests they're trying to prevent damage from," said Katie Fast, the executive director of Oregonians for Food and Shelter. She says that without chlorpyrifos, farmers who grow plants like broccoli, onions and cauliflower would lose a large amount of their harvest to insects.

In fact, in Oregon, chlorpyrifos is widely used on orchards and grapes, which already have viable alternative pesticides available.

Critics of the pesticide say that it can harm farmworkers who apply it, or who work in fields near it.

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Fast said that safety procedures and regulations protect farmworkers from the pesticide as they apply it. "You have to look at pesticides holistically," says Fast, "There are tradeoffs for all of them." Other pesticides could be toxic, says Fast, so worker protections matter more than banning the pesticides.

But groups that represent those farmworkers support a ban

(<https://www.opb.org/news/article/farmworker-groups-seek-ban-on-pesticide/>), saying that chlorpyrifos is one of the most frequently cited causes

## A Toxic Pesticide Once Targeted For A Ban Was Probably Sprayed On Your Christmas Tree ([/news/article/toxic-pesticide-christmas-tree-harmful-children/](https://www.opb.org/news/article/toxic-pesticide-christmas-tree-harmful-children/))

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of pesticide poisoning, and pesticides frequently drift beyond where they're applied, where they can expose people who don't have protective equipment.

Although there are laws against pesticide drift, it's hard to prevent. In the past (<https://www.opb.org/news/article/toxic-pesticide-christmas-tree-harmful-children/>), the chlorpyrifos drifted from an Oregon Christmas tree farm

(<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5017888-170612-Case-Detail.html>) onto a neighbor's property, allegedly sickening chickens. In Dallas, Oregon workers were exposed to a drifting cloud (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5626088-Polk-County-317718091.html>) while cleaning out a culvert. And it enters the ecosystem: crayfish died after chlorpyrifos ran into a creek in Hermiston, Oregon (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5017887-170586-Case-Detail.html>).

At hearings held in Salem last spring about the proposed legislation, both farmers, farmworkers, scientists, and environmental groups gave testimony. Groups representing farmers argue that the bill was allowed to die because the evidence against chlorpyrifos is shaky, or because alternatives aren't ready.

But that hasn't stopped California, a similarly agricultural state, from passing a partial pesticide ban, Arkin said, adding that there's one big reason the chlorpyrifos legislation failed: lobbying and political pressure.

Dembrow agreed.

"They were pretty locked down in their lobbying effort, and it's always easier to kill something than it is to pass it," said Dembrow, adding that near the end of Oregon's legislative season it seemed like the EPA might follow through on their ban, which would have rendered Oregon's legislation unnecessary. It's possible that caused them to lose momentum.

Dembrow is unsure if the bill will be reintroduced this coming legislative session. It's a "short session," so each lawmaker can only introduce one bill, and Dembrow doesn't want to waste his one shot on something that might not pass.

But come 2021, Dembrow plans to try again. And now that the EPA has decided not to ban the pesticide, Dembrow thinks he might have more support.

“This is a very serious health hazard,” says Dembrow, “We need to keep working on it.”

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