

# The Ruckelshaus ban on EDB will sabotage agriculture

by Marjorie Hecht and Lonnie Wolfe

The Environmental Protection Agency issued an emergency ban in September on the major agricultural use of ethylene dibromide (EDB) because, it said, the chemical is contaminating groundwater in several states and had increased the risk of cancer and birth defects. Although the environmentalists and the news media have promoted this particular cancer scare story for the past few years, *there are no facts to back it up*: Scientists have found no evidence showing that EDB use leads to an increased risk of cancer in humans.

The truth is that it is the ban on EDB that will cause damage to human life. If not reversed, the ban will shut down nearly all tropical and semitropical fruit production in the Western Hemisphere—U.S. citrus growers, as well as Caribbean fruit exports. Alternatives will be less effective and much more costly. The EPA has acknowledged that damage to the citrus fruit crop alone as a result of the ban will amount to \$69 million per year. Grain storage will also be endangered. There is no current replacement for EDB as a liquid fumigant for use in infested grain silos.

## Whose risk?

EDB has been widely used since 1948 to combat soil nematodes, soil insects, and various tropical fruit flies. The emergency ban applies to the use of EDB as a soil fumigant, where it is injected into the soil to kill nematodes and other insects, particularly in citrus groves, but also to protect cotton, potatoes, peanuts, and other row crops. The EPA also ordered a one-year phase-out of other uses of EDB, such as the fumigation of citrus and tropical fruits after harvest and fumigation of flour mills and grain silos.

The ban was piously justified by EPA head William Ruckelshaus, the man who admitted 10 years ago that he banned the pesticide DDT for political, not scientific, reasons, after seven months of EPA hearings had shown the DDT to be safe. Ruckelshaus said that the immediate ban on EDB was necessary because “human health risks . . . clearly outweigh the benefits of waiting the 30 days before such bans normally become effective.”

The question of risk is key. As the EPA has practiced it, health risk is postulated not on scientific fact but on public opinion, while the real risk—what happens if the pesticide in

question is *not* used—is ignored.

For example, since DDT was banned in 1972, the incidence of malaria has increased worldwide. Now 210 million people suffer from the disease and 10 million people die per year from it. A well-known U.S. expert on pesticides, entomologist J. Gordon Edwards of San José State University in California, has estimated that anti-pesticide regulations in the United States are responsible, directly and indirectly, for the death of between 60 million and 100 million people a year. This staggering death toll is not part of the EPA calculation of risk.

## Falsified data?

While Ruckelshaus did not base his final judgement on DDT on scientific evidence, he did wave reams of test data that allegedly showed potential harm to humans to justify his claim that scientific opinion was “divided” on the matter. That test data were for the most part compiled in the Bio-Test Laboratories, an outfit reportedly employing former Ruckelshaus EPA staff and created with the assistance of Ruckelshaus-backed EPA contracts. This fact alone would cause its data on politically explosive issues such as DDT to be suspect.

In late October, officials of Bio-Test Labs were convicted for conducting fraudulent tests and fudging results. But Bio-Test’s connection to the DDT ban was neatly covered up by current EPA officials and their obliging allies in the media. Instead of calling for the entire DDT file to be reopened, EPA officials used the Bio-Test case to call for additional bans on chemicals and toxins that have already been approved for use.

## No case for the ban

The scientific verdict on EDB is clear: It has not been shown to cause cancer or damage the reproductive capability in humans, although both these effects have been shown with mice in the laboratory.

Dr. Sorell Schwartz of the Department of Pharmacology at the Georgetown University School of Medicine told *EIR*: “Although EDB is found to be a potent animal carcinogen in laboratory tests, after 35 years experience with human exposure an equivalent risk has not been shown in humans. . . .

The risk of cancer associated with pesticides used in an appropriate fashion is extremely low and what risk there is is a theoretical one based on highly controversial mathematical assessment methods.”

Dr. Ely M. Swisher, a consultant who worked for 38 years in the pesticide industry, commented: “To my knowledge, there has never been any proven case of cancer related to the use of pesticides when these are used reliably on a food product. . . . All the allegations about cancer caused by pesticides are based on speculation. . . . There has been no case of anyone coming down with any serious disease from eating fruit or vegetables when those contained the allowable amount of pesticide residue. . . . That residue won’t cause any disease. The legal amounts are so low, that there is no way this could happen.”

According to some observers, what clinched the 10-year debate on EDB for the EPA ban was the media propaganda around an accident in which two chemical employees died in Bakersfield, California a year ago, after entering what they mistakenly thought was an empty tank of EDB to clean it. In mid-September, ABC-TV ran a gory documentary conveying the idea that scientists agree that there is no difference between the minute traces of EDB found in the soil or water and the relatively enormous amount of EDB in the tank—any detectable amount of EDB is bad.

In the Bakersville incident, the plant foreman entered the tank to clean it without wearing any protective gear. When he collapsed, the plant manager went into the tank to rescue him, also without the required protective gear, and he too collapsed. Both men died from the effects of exposure to a very high concentration of EDB.

## The damage

The citrus-producing states—Florida, California, Texas, Arizona, and Hawaii—have an endemic problem with various types of fruit flies—including the medfly, and in Florida, the mexfly—which infest the harvested fruit; these states will not be able to export fruit or ship it interstate without finding an alternative to EDB. According to a spokesman for the Florida Department of Citrus, “There is no chemical alternative.”

The Democratic Party’s Agriculture Policy Committee chairman, Texas Agriculture Commissioner Jim Hightower, put out a press release immediately after the EPA ban extolling the virtues of biologicals, “natural pesticides,” such as sterilization of fruit flies; but this simply cannot do the job. Hightower’s career has been backed by the Field Foundation, the Institute for Policy Studies, and other funders of the radical environmentalists who are campaigning against high-technology agriculture; he headed their front group, the Agriculture Accountability Project.

Cold storage for fruit quarantine is also impractical because of the length of time most fruit has to be stored (13 to 17 days for oranges) and the energy cost. Also, many tropical fruits cannot take the cold storage treatment. A third alter-

native, gamma-ray irradiation, could be viable within 18 months, if not for the media/environmentalist propaganda about nuclear radiation that has prevented the development of this industry.

To fumigate infested grain, farmers have used EDB, which can be applied directly from the top of the silo. There is no substitute chemical which is both inexpensive enough and easy to use. The only alternative is for the farmer to hire a professional fumigation service, which is much more costly. EDB is also applied periodically to fumigate hard-to-reach sections of milling equipment.

## Administration boxed in

Under Ruckelshaus’s direction, the EPA is operating as a rogue agency, outside the control of any responsible figures in the administration, even the White House itself. As the EDB decision indicates, EPA is taking actions which are not only scientifically unsound and destructive to the economy but politically damaging to the President’s constituencies.

The President’s advisers are aware of this situation, but feel powerless to correct it. “The media and the Congress have boxed them in,” said a source familiar with White House thinking. “They ran that Watergate of the previous EPA leadership on the toxic waste question and forced Reagan to fire people. More importantly, to bail out the situation, the White House stupidly turned to Ruckelshaus and all but gave him a blank check to do as he pleases. Now they feel they can’t touch Ruckelshaus or they will get bad press. It’s an election year, you know.”

The watering of former EPA chief Anne Burford also claimed Dr. John Todhunter, the head of the EPA’s toxic chemicals and pesticide program. Todhunter’s major crime was his refusal to accede to every demand of his rabidly-environmentalist staff for wholesale bans of alleged chemical toxins, including EDB.

The man who replaced Todhunter is the ringleader of this gang of environmental saboteurs and scientific fakers, Ed Johnson. A man who privately boasts of his friendship with the leadership of the Friends of the Earth and similar environmental groups, Johnson has been involved in every ban of chemicals made by EPA since the DDT decision. He gained infamy with U.S. farmers when he almost single-handedly banned the only chemical effective against the crop-destroying fire ant.

Ruckelshaus, Johnson, and their co-conspirators have been given cover for their action on EDB by a chorus of environmentalists and others who claim that the ban is not extensive enough. The AFL-CIO, for example, dispatched a letter from its Grain Millers Union demanding that the ban be total and immediate. Johnson, sources say, privately welcomes such assistance and even solicits it.

“The EDB is an important test case,” said a corporate environmental consultant. “Ruckelshaus and Johnson are feeling their oats. If they can get away with this there is no telling where they might strike next.”