

EPA ASKED TO CRACK DOWN ON NATURAL PESTICIDES

[0 Comments](#) | [Palm Beach Post, Jan 1, 2007](#) | by [JEFF NESMITH](#)
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When Steven Bessette, a West Palm Beach lawyer, was told by his pregnant wife he no longer could have the house sprayed for termites, palmetto bugs and other insects, he started looking for alternatives.

Now no longer practicing law, Bessette heads EcoSMART Technologies, a company that operates out of Alpharetta, Ga., in suburban Atlanta, selling formulations from peppermint oil, thyme and other natural products for controlling farm and home pests.

Hollie Mulhaupt, an Austin, Texas, nurse, said warnings that the popular bug repellent DEET causes nerve damage prompted her to come up with Texas Bug Juice, her own mix of natural plant oils to drive away mosquitoes.

On its Web site, her Texas Herbal Body Solutions Co. says the bug repellent not only can make camping trips and picnics more enjoyable but can help you avoid insect-borne West Nile virus.

Mulhaupt and Bessette are players in the natural pesticides industry, which claims rapid sales growth in the past decade. Now, the makers of conventional pesticides are asking the Environmental Protection Agency to require proof that these products actually work.

Currently, the EPA does not regulate "minimum-risk" pesticides produced from natural products such as peppermint oil, licorice, garlic, lemon grass and thyme that are "generally recognized as safe."

As long as labels do not make a specific health claim or list a specific disease that a targeted bug or other pest may carry, the EPA doesn't require marketers to prove that the substances work.

The Consumer Specialty Products Association, whose members include manufacturers of conventional chemical pesticides, sent the EPA a petition in March arguing that a product that claims to kill or repel a pest known to carry a disease is making a health claim, even if its label does not specifically refer to the disease.

It asks the EPA to require manufacturers of such products to provide scientific data showing that the products are efficacious.

Consumers already know ticks spread Lyme disease and mosquitoes carry the West Nile virus and may use natural products to protect themselves from those diseases, the petition notes.

In addition, the claim that Texas Bug Juice can help you avoid the West Nile virus legally can appear on Herbal Body Solutions' Web site, possibly moving the claim away from the EPA's regulatory reach, the association says.

"This is a public health issue," said Stephen Kellner, vice president and general counsel of the Washington-based trade group. "We are concerned about products that mislead people into thinking that they are effective, when in fact they are not."

Natural product manufacturers say requirements that they produce expensive scientific data could put them out of business. Some environmental groups, pleased with the growth of alternatives to controversial chemical pesticides, agree.

Jennifer Sass of the Natural Resources Defense Council said the EPA routinely waives efficacy requirements for conventional farm pesticides, which make up the overwhelming share of the market.

Her group and others, such as Beyond Pesticides and the Glynn Environmental Coalition of Brunswick, Ga., say the agency should do a thorough review of the way it regulates all pesticides, not just those based on natural substances.

Bessette, who says his EcoSMART Technologies contracts with chemical manufacturers to blend his patented bug-killing formulas, believes big pesticide producers are out to eliminate growing competition.

"Nobody was concerned about botanicals until we started taking market share," he said. "Now they want to put as many hurdles between us and the market as possible. That's the only reason this petition has been filed."

Patent office records show Bessette's most recent patent was issued in September for a blend of benzyl alcohol and phenethyl propionate, both on the EPA list of minimum-risk substances, for use in killing ants, fleas, beetles, flies, crickets, pill bugs, spiders and quite a few other creepy-crawlies.

He says field trials by companies that use his EcoSMART formulations have shown them to be effective. His customers seem to agree.

Western Exterminator Co. of Anaheim, Calif., said in a comment on the petition before the EPA that it has tested an EcoSMART product in more than 2,500 homes and found the effectiveness and cost to be "in line with conventional" pesticides.

On the other hand, the Association of American Pesticide Control Officials urged the EPA to approve the new requirements.

"With so much at stake relating to health and people wanting to use 'safe' products, it appears time that these materials are held accountable to ensure they actually do protect human and animal health," the organization said.

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