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Store-bought pesticides found in local wildlife

By Erik Skindrud GAZETTE REPORTER



Erik Skindrud | The Gazette The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has asked pesticide manufacturers to discontinue products containing anti-coagulant rodent poison. The makers of d-Con and some of the other products seen here have refused, however, prompting the EPA to seek

from clotting. When a rodent eats the bait, the animal bleeds internally, killing it within a day or two. If a predator eats the rodent as it's dying, the predator gets a harmful dose as well. The EPA says that as many as 15,000 children ingest the bait and get sick each year. Banning the poisons will "protect household pets" too, the EPA's Steve Owens said in a statement.

Local findings suggest the concerns are valid. A survey by U.C. Berkeley directed teams in Mariposa and Madera counties found that 90 percent of one kind of animal contained traces of the poisons.

Called fisher, the predators are a type of marten—similar to a weasel—that hunt squirrels and other rodents. They are rare in the area—only about 350 survive in the central Sierra. Scientists have found no fisher north of the Merced River. Their reduced numbers are due to logging and trapping over the past century and a half, researchers say.

Now their survival may be threatened by poisons called rodenticides by scientists. In 2009, scientists recovered a dead fisher near Fish Camp and tested it for chemicals. The result showed a lethal dose of rodent poison. It was the first confirmed fisher death from rodenticide in the western U.S.

Scientists then tested 21 dead animals. A full 90 percent came up positive for rodent poison.

Rodent poisons that pass to predators via dying squirrels, rats and mice remain in stores despite a recent Environmental Protection Agency request that manufacturers withdraw the products. Here in the central Sierra, a survey shows that the poisons are present in local wildlife and doing harm.

"This is a very active area of investigation," said Rick Sweitzer, a wildlife biologist based outside of Oakhurst. "We have about 10 more samples (out for testing), and we're looking forward to learning if there have been additional exposures."

In June, the EPA said that the chemicals in question will likely be banned within a year or two. For now, however, the pesticides remain on shelves across the country.

Called "second-generation anticoagulants," the chemicals prevent blood



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Project leader Rick Sweitzer oversees a multi-year study to learn about the life and habits of the fisher—an elusive mammal that was formerly trapped for its fur throughout North America. The study has found traces of pesticide in 90 percent of fisher tested for the chemicals.

“What we don’t know is how these rodenticides may be affecting their behavior,” project leader Sweitzer of U.C. Berkeley said. “(Low doses may be) making them more susceptible to mortality.”

Ten more dead animals are being tested. Results will be presented on Tuesday, July 19 in Fresno. The day-long event will present a range of findings from the fisher study. The meeting runs from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the U.C. Merced Center, 550 E. Shaw Ave in Fresno.

The fisher study is not the only one that has confirmed rodent poison in wildlife. Other research found that 79 percent of the endangered San Joaquin kit foxes around Bakersfield had rodenticide present. Outside of Los Angeles, 90 percent of bobcats tested positive for the poisons. Similar results have been obtained as far away as New York, Canada and Britain.

“Rodenticides are the new DDT,” Maggie Sergio of Bay Area-based WildCare told the Sacramento Bee in April. “It is an emergency, an environmental disaster. We are killing nature’s own rodent control.”

Manufacturers of products like d-Con and Enforcer Mouse Max have vowed to challenge the EPA, however. They argue that used correctly, the chemicals are safe. Some researchers say that marijuana farmers using the chemicals may be part of the problem.

Eventually, however, a ban seems likely. The issue could take a year or more to work its way through the courts, though.

Squirrels, mice and rats are messy and unpleasant. Mice can carry hantavirus—a potentially fatal illness in humans. No one can blame people for wanting to get rid of them.

Recent discoveries suggest that people need to find a better way to do so.

In this case, the better mousetrap may be an old-fashioned one.

The EPA offers the following guidelines for homeowners and others seeking to get rid of rodents.

- Seal holes inside and out of a structure to prevent rodent entry
- Clean-up potential food sources and nesting sites
- Keep an eye out for rodent droppings
- Keep an eye out for nesting materials like shredded paper
- Place traps and approved bait stations where children and pets can’t reach them
- Use professional pest control for severe infestations
- Use traps that are sized correctly for rats or mice