

news

Predator Poison

DeFazio plans to ban deadly toxins

BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN

It's been called "one of the most dangerous [toxins] known to man," and it was banned in 1972 after it killed 13 people.

Compound 1080 (sodium monofluoroacetate) is a colorless, odorless, tasteless poison that has no antidote and its use was reintroduced in the U.S. in the early 1980s to kill predators. Since then it has also killed pet dogs and turned up in former dictator Saddam Hussein's chemical laboratories in Iraq.

Congressman Peter DeFazio is seeking cosponsors for a bill, the "Compound 1080 and M-44 Elimination Bill," that would ban its use and possession as well as the use of highly toxic M-44 sodium cyanide devices.

This isn't the first time DeFazio has produced legislation to ban Compound 1080. He asked the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to halt production of Compound 1080 in 2004 and then took the issue to the Department of Homeland Security. He introduced a bill, HR 4567, banning 1080 last year after the substance was found in Iraq. The bill was referred to the Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security, but never picked up any cosponsors in the House. This latest legislation, which does not yet have a bill number, would ban both Compound 1080 and M-44 devices. It would make it not only illegal to use the substances but to possess them as well.



Compound 1080 was first developed as a rat poison in Nazi Germany, according to Brooks Fahy of Eugene's Predator Defense. Fahy has been working to end the use of Compound 1080 since before its use was reintroduced in the Reagan era. It is so toxic that "one teaspoon can kill up to 100 human adults," says a letter from DeFazio to his congressional colleagues seeking cosponsors for the bill.

The chemical is produced in only one place, Tull Chemical Co. in Alabama, and it is used legally by only one group in the U.S. — the USDA Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) Wildlife Services. It is used in something called a "livestock protection collar." This device is placed around the neck of a sheep and has two rubber bladders filled with 1080; when a predator such as a coyote goes to kill the animal, it instead ingests the toxin when it bites down, and it later dies. The bladders can also be burst by barbed wire or other sharp objects. Each collar contains enough poison to kill five people, says DeFazio's letter.

"I have nightmares about this stuff," says Fahy, who says it can take hours or days for an affected animal to die. Compound 1080 causes vomiting, convulsions and collapse. Heart failure is usually the cause of death. It is so potent, according to Fahy, that animals eating tainted carcasses — even months after that poisoned animal has died — can die of secondary poisoning.

After the substance's reintroduction, Predator Defense successfully campaigned to have Compound 1080's use banned in Oregon in 1998. However there has been evidence that the substance has been used illegally to kill federally protected wolves, eagles and other predators as well as domestic pets

across the West, says Fahy.

M-44 devices, which would also be banned under the bill, have also killed pets and endangered species. They consist of a spring-loaded ejector wrapped in an absorbent material coated with a goo that attracts coyotes and dogs. When an animal pulls on the material, the device sprays sodium cyanide granules with enough force to send the poison five feet into the air.

Some 12,000 to 15,000 coyotes are killed each year by M-44s, says Fahy, along with hundreds of dogs. In one incident in Jan. 2000, Buddy, an Estacada family's dog, was killed by one of seven M-44s planted on a suburban Christmas tree farm. The devices were planted by Wildlife Services in response to complaints of coyotes in the area.

Unlike Compound 1080, sodium cyanide does have an antidote — amyl nitrate — but it is only effective if administered immediately. According to the USDA APHIS website, an M-44 kills within 10 seconds to two minutes.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) lists both sodium cyanide and Compound 1080 as chemical agents in its section on chemical emergencies. Scientists have speculated that Compound 1080, because it is odorless and tasteless, could be mixed in with water supplies in a terrorist attack. "It's been called a great tool for assassination," says Fahy, because "it's difficult to find in the body."

"This isn't just a wildlife issue," says Fahy, "it's a national security issue."

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