

Company abruptly stops marketing controversial crop fumigant

By Steve Chawkins and Diana Marcum, Los Angeles Times

A years-long environmental battle ended abruptly when the company producing a fumigant for strawberries and other crops yanked it from U.S. distribution, bringing relief to activists and raising concern among growers.

Methyl iodide, meant to replace an ozone-depleting fumigant being phased out by an international treaty, was believed to have little effect on air quality. But some scientists say it can cause cancer, brain damage and miscarriages among workers who handle it and can be a threat to ground water.

In California, which produces 90% of the nation's strawberries, environmental advocates reacted enthusiastically Wednesday to the announcement by Tokyo-based Arysta LifeScience Inc.

"This way is more powerful than a court victory. It's a concession. It's them walking," said Greg Loarie, lead attorney in a lawsuit attacking the process California used to approve the chemical in 2010.

"Today I'm really happy," said 19-year-old Gabriela Rincon, who joined marches against the chemical and told her parents, both pickers in the Salinas area, about the risk. "It feels like someone finally listened to us about something really important."

An Arysta spokeswoman said the decision late Tuesday to abandon U.S. production and marketing of the company's trademarked Midas fumigant was financial. Arysta will continue

to market the chemical outside the U.S.

In 2011, the first full year it was available as a replacement for methyl bromide, only one strawberry grower used it, on a small plot outside Santa Maria, according to the California Strawberry Commission.

Several pepper farmers in the Central Valley also reportedly applied the chemical. Its chilly reception among growers contrasted sharply with the urgency expressed by state officials in 2010, when then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger deemed its approval an “emergency.”

For some growers, the legal risk of using a compound that had generated intense notoriety proved too great.

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