

EPA again orders Amazon to stop selling illegal pesticides

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For the third time in three years, the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has ordered Amazon to stop selling illegal pesticides on its online marketplace, saying the chemicals pose "a significant and immediate health risk to consumers, children, pets, and others exposed to the products."

In its most recent "stop-sale" order, issued last month and announced Tuesday, the EPA's Seattle office told Amazon to take down listings for dozens of products the agency said are potentially dangerous or ineffective, including some products claiming to kill viruses.

Amazon has removed those products, a spokesperson for the Seattle-based commerce giant said in a statement. Since the order was issued on Jan. 7, Amazon has put "processes in place" to "proactively block" unregistered pesticides and products making inaccurate claims about COVID-19 before they are listed for sale, the spokesperson said.

The environmental agency has been playing a cat-and-mouse game with illegal pesticide vendors on

Amazon.com for almost a decade.

Between 2013 and 2018, the EPA charged that Amazon committed nearly 4,000 violations of the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act by allowing third-party vendors to sell and distribute from Amazon warehouses pesticides and disinfectants that had not been evaluated by the EPA for safety and efficacy.

Amazon settled those charges for \$1.2 million and committed to more closely monitoring and removing illegal pesticides from its platform.

Since then, far fewer illegal pesticides and disinfectants have found their way onto the platform, said Chad Schulze, the EPA's pesticide enforcement lead in Seattle, and those that do are less toxic. And among e-commerce platforms, he said in an interview Tuesday, Amazon is "a better place than any other e-commerce site out there."

"But is (Amazon) perfect? Is it stopping everything we need them to stop?" he said. "No."

As part of the 2018 settlement, for instance, Amazon created an e-learning module on federal pesticide regulations and required all vendors selling pesticides on its platform to score higher than 80% on the end-of-course quiz.

"But as my co-workers have found out, there are a bunch of YouTube videos that give you the answers," Schulze said. One such answer key is among the first Google results for the search term "Amazon pesticide test." And the agency continues to interdict shipments of illegal pesticides destined for Amazon fulfillment centers, Schulze said.

Last June, the EPA ordered Amazon to remove more than 30 illegal pesticides still for sale, including one labeled "Amazon's Choice," signifying the company recommended it to consumers. The latest action added 70 products to that list,

including products marketed as household and pool cleansers, bracelets purporting to repel mosquitoes and a range of appliances claiming to kill or neutralize viruses.

"We have no idea what those products are made of," Schulze said. "And when you have people purchasing a product that says it will kill or control viruses in their personal space but it does not, that's a huge risk as well."

Consumers seeking protection against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, should purchase products on the EPA's list of suggested disinfectants, the agency said in a news release.

Despite Amazon's progress, EPA officials remain concerned about the retailer's continued noncompliance with federal pesticide safety statutes.

"It's pretty unprecedented from an enforcement perspective to have to issue administrative orders and penalty orders numerous times," said Brett Dugan, the EPA's assistant regional counsel, in an interview Tuesday. Typically, he said, "companies that receive a formal enforcement response from a federal agency change their practice completely.

"That has not happened here," Dugan said.

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