

Stop farmers from using oil wastewater on crops

Carolyn Norr, Sacramento Bee, 7-15-16

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I have an almost 2-year-old, which means I spend a lot of time calling out, “That doesn’t go in your mouth! That’s not food!” I remove the staples, batteries and pebbles he is attempting to sample and offer him what I hope is a healthy snack instead.

Yet recently I learned that many fresh fruits, vegetables and nuts could contain some very inedible ingredients – chemicals used in oil and gas extraction.

Though few of us realize it, more than 100 farms in our state use oil wastewater for irrigation. It’s been going on for more than 20 years, but in our parched state, fossil fuel companies are increasingly selling their toxic wastewater to farmers to irrigate crops.

As consumers, we have no way to know how much of this is reaching our kids or what it is doing to their bodies or ours. That’s why Saturday hundreds of parents will be at local grocery stores to ask shoppers to join us in calling on Gov. Jerry Brown and the State Water Board to stop this practice. More than 250,000 have already signed a petition asking for an immediate ban.

Many people have heard that fracking creates large amounts of toxic wastewater, but other oil and gas technologies also produce tainted water that is being used to irrigate fruits and veggies sold all over California.

The danger here is clear: Plants take up the water they are irrigated with. I have done the experiment with my older son where we put a stalk of celery in a glass of water with red food coloring, and the celery turns red. If we swap benzene for the food coloring, it becomes an experiment I don’t want to do – especially not with my kids as guinea pigs.

I find it infuriating the state is allowing this practice without even knowing exactly what this wastewater contains. What we do know is that there are hundreds of chemicals used in fossil fuel operations, some of which are known to cause cancer, kidney failure and liver damage. The Center of Biological Diversity found that oil wastewater contained dangerous levels of benzene, chromium-6 and toluene – chemicals that are all linked to cancer and reproductive issues.

As a parent, I can’t afford to wait any longer for regulators to act as they did, tragically, in places like Flint, Mich.

As clear as this seems, it does raise some deeper questions about our food, our safety and our energy production. If we don’t use the wastewater on our crops, what should we do with it? Injected back into the ground, it contaminates our groundwater. Meanwhile, how will our farmers manage to irrigate their crops?

I can’t think of a single safe thing to do except to not create this poisoned water in the first place. We should replace fracking and harmful oil development with renewable energy and conservation, and keep all our food safe for kids to eat.