

Dangerous Pesticides Are Being Found In Colorado's Weed

The state doesn't yet require marijuana businesses to conduct pesticide testing, leading to a "buyer beware" market.

Colorado's agricultural agencies are in panic mode after several independent studies found dangerous levels of pesticides in marijuana products.

A CNN report published Wednesday found that at least one over-the-counter product tested positive for illegally high levels of the neurotoxin imidacloprid. CNN commissioned tests by an independent lab, and the report ultimately led to a recall of 2,362 pot products. A similar Denver Post study in September yielded similar findings -- some of the cannabis products tested had as much as six times the federally allowed limit on pesticides in consumable products.

If the pesticides had been found on, say, avocados, the products would have been taken off the shelves immediately. But Colorado's oversight of pesticides on marijuana has been limited, other than a handful of recalls and plant quarantines.

Colorado and other states that recently legalized marijuana are just beginning to grapple with the pesticide issue. An absence of federal regulation has left the states struggling to figure out how to pass pesticide legislation, how to enforce it and which agencies should be doing the enforcing.

Gobi Analytical is the only lab in Denver that is approved to test cannabis for pesticides. This sample of a cannabis infused edible is at the beginning of the preparation process to undergo pesticide testing.

Mahala Gaylord via Getty Images Gobi Analytical is the only lab in Denver that is approved to test cannabis for pesticides. This sample of a cannabis infused edible is at the beginning of the preparation process to undergo pesticide testing.

Marijuana businesses in Colorado are not required to conduct pesticide testing before products hit the shelves, nor does the state conduct random testing after the items are already on the market. The federal Environmental Protection Agency, which usually regulates pesticides, doesn't have oversight because the federal government still lists marijuana as an illegal Schedule I drug. That has led to confusion over which pesticides can be used and in what amounts, CNN notes.

The ambiguity has left marijuana businesses and growers with the burden of self-regulating by taking their own products to state-licensed labs and getting them tested for potency and pesticides. Larry Wolk, executive director of the Colorado Department of Health and Environment, called it a "buyer beware" market, in which it's up to consumers and local businesses to vet products. However, Wolk noted that multiple state agencies are working to fix the situation.

Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper (D) issued an executive order earlier this month giving agencies the power to keep products off the shelves and destroy them if they contain pesticide levels above what's approved by the EPA. Before the order, those products could end up back on the market.

"When a pesticide is applied to a crop in a manner that is inconsistent with the pesticide's label, and the crop is contaminated by that pesticide, it constitutes a threat to the public safety," Hickenlooper's order states.

It's a step in the right direction, but it still doesn't require businesses to test for pesticides in the first place. Wolk said it'll still be at least six months before the state can work out pesticide labeling that would help consumers easily identify state-approved products.

The Denver Post reported that the state is also trying to pass legislation that would stop the use of illegal pesticides before they even make contact with a crop:

The state is amid rulemaking that would strictly limit the pesticides that can be used on marijuana only to those whose labels allow for unspecified crops; that can be used in greenhouses; and that are not prohibited from human consumption. Pesticides allowed in tobacco cultivation also would be approved.

In Oregon, another state that recently legalized marijuana, new rules starting next year will require marijuana products to be screened for 60 pesticides, while testing labs will have to be accredited by the state, The Oregonian reports.

