

## EPA greenlights continued use of antibiotic to fight citrus disease in California & Florida

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency quietly issued another emergency approval for farmers in California and Florida to continue applying a medically important antibiotic to citrus crops. Because the drug is used to treat tuberculosis in humans, the move has raised concerns that it could exacerbate widespread antibiotic resistance.

Although the decision is dated April 2019, it was not published in the Federal Register until January, and the EPA did not publicize the approval. The authorization runs until April in California and December in Florida.

The EPA says that widespread application of the drug streptomycin, as well as a similar antibiotic it has approved called oxytetracycline, is necessary to fight citrus greening disease, which has decimated much of Florida's orange and grapefruit yield and appeared in Southern California in 2008.

The disease is spread by bacteria riding on the Asian citrus psyllid, an insect. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, at least 2.8 million people are infected with antibiotic-resistant bacteria, and more than 35,000 people die as a result.

In a statement provided to The Desert Sun, EPA staff said the impact of streptomycin use in agriculture is "considered negligible" when compared to the level of antibiotics used in livestock. "Streptomycin, an antibiotic, is a critical tool used by farmers to control citrus greening. Citrus greening is considered the most serious citrus disease worldwide," the statement said.

But the decision to approve the continued use of streptomycin, which was initially approved to combat citrus greening in Florida in 2016 and California in 2018, was predicated on "loopholes and weird things going on with the law," said Emily Knobbe, an EPA policy specialist with the Center for Biological Diversity, which has for years acted as





a watchdog on the federal government's approvals of pesticides and related chemicals. The center was first to note the January Federal Register entry.

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