

EPA looks at use of pesticide that sickened family at resort

April 7 2015, by Brett Zongker

An odorless pesticide sprayed at a Caribbean resort has left three members of a Delaware family hospitalized for weeks after they became seriously ill during their Virgin Islands vacation, and federal officials said Tuesday that investigators found the toxic chemical has been used at the resort several times before.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials said the agency is looking into the use of the pesticide methyl bromide at the Sirenusa Condominium Resort in Cruz Bay, St. John. The agency is contacting people, including resort employees, to determine how many others might have been exposed to the pesticide, which is prohibited in residential settings. The Justice Department also is investigating the company that may be responsible.

The Esmond family of Wilmington, Delaware, was staying at the resort when they began having seizures March 20.

A family spokesman said Steve Esmond, his wife, Theresa Devine, and their two teenage sons were airlifted to hospitals on the U.S. mainland. The sons are in critical condition. Esmond has regained consciousness, but his sons have remained in a coma weeks after the exposure, family spokesman James Maron told The News Journal of Wilmington. Devine was treated and released.

"They are confident in their medical professionals and are hopeful for a full recovery," Maron said in a written statement Tuesday. "The Esmond

family thanks everyone for their support and concern for their recovery from this unthinkable tragedy of pesticide poisoning."

Esmond is head of a private middle school in Wilmington, and Devine is a dentist.

Use of the pesticide was confirmed the day after the family became ill, which has helped inform doctors on how to treat the family, said Judith Enck, the EPA's regional administrator in New York City, which has jurisdiction over the U.S. Virgin Islands.

"We have confirmed that the problem is indeed methyl bromide," she said. "Methyl bromide is a potent neurotoxin. It's a gas. It can cause convulsions, coma, cognitive deficits, inflammation of the lungs. A lot depends on how much a person is exposed to and for what period of time."

The EPA banned the chemical for residential use in 1984 primarily for health concerns. That ban extends to U.S. territories, including the Virgin Islands, Enck said.

So far the investigation has revealed a certified applicator working for Memphis, Tennessee-based Terminix applied the methyl bromide in the complex while targeting an indoor beetle that consumes wood, Enck said. The company is now under a criminal investigation led by the U.S. Justice Department.

Terminix issued a statement saying the safety of its customers and employees is a top priority.

"First and foremost, the family is in our thoughts and prayers," spokesman Michael Wassmer said. "We're cooperating with authorities in their investigation, and we're conducting our own thorough internal

investigation."

Investigators also learned methyl bromide has been used in the complex before, the EPA said, but it's not clear why the ban was ignored.

"Certified pesticide applicators know this is not approved for indoor residential use," Enck said. "The health effects are quite serious."

Sea Glass Vacations LLC, which rents units at Sirenusa, said in a statement that it has terminated its contract with Terminix and the home under investigation is unoccupied. The rental company earlier said the unit below the Esmond family's dwelling was treated for pests by Terminix.

"We are sending our thoughts and prayers to the family impacted by this tragic incident," the company said. "We remain committed to full cooperation with all local and federal authorities."

The EPA is continuing to test and monitor the property and is continuing to investigate the details of the family's exposure, Enck said, "to make sure it never happens again anywhere."

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