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Officials say no threat to public health

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A presentation hosted by Davis Students for Nader two weeks ago raised questions about the possibility of harmful microbes in local soil, but public health officials say the claims are unfounded.

The presentation featured the mother of former Sacramento resident David Bell, who claimed he became ill after working with biopesticides for Davis biotech firm AgraQuest in the late 1990s.

Jeff Pinnow, supervising hazardous materials specialist for Yolo County Environmental Health, said that the complaint did not come into Yolo County until 2007, even though Bell began experiencing symptoms a few months after he started at the company in 1998. Bell's mother, Sandi Trend, took it to the Yolo County District Attorney's Office and was mainly approaching it from the standpoint of worker's compensation issues, said Pinnow.

When Pinnow looked at the complaint he said that most of it dealt with worker's health and safety as well as soil importation into the country.

"If we thought it was a threat we would have initiated some type of investigation or we would have found some other agency to do it," Pinnow said. "[Any loose microbes] have been out getting rained on and open to elements for 10 years and I have one repeated case of illness. The likelihood of that being a public health threat - it doesn't even rise to that level."

Pinnow said that if the information had been reported in 1998 or 1999, there would have been more urgency.

At a presentation hosted by Davis Students for Nader, Trend spoke about her son's experience working at AgraQuest. Months after he had been working at the company's original location as an assistant researcher at Kennedy Place in Davis, Bell's health began to deteriorate. The company moved to a new facility on Drew Avenue in 1999.

After several clinic visits and a total of four sinus surgeries since then, a series of exams at the Mayo Clinic showed Bell had histoplasma, a mold found in soil, in his body and he was diagnosed with histoplasmosis. Bell has had a series of immunoglobulin infusions, each lasting for seven hours, for three years. Each costs \$7,000 to \$15,000, Trend said.

A written statement from AgraQuest said that the *Bacillus subtilis* strain is the only active ingredient in AgraQuest's product Serenade, a project Bell was working on. "It has been tested in accordance with EPA and EU guidelines for microbial pesticides and poses no significant risk to handlers or the environment used according to label instructions," the report says.

The statement also says that the EPA, which regulates all products sold for pest management purposes, investigated the report. In March, the EPA issued a document that said, "Histoplasmosis is an infection due to *Histoplasma*, a fungal species not related to *Bacillus*

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subtilis."

AgraQuest's statement said, "The CDC further reports that Histoplasma is endemic in certain areas of the U.S. and is commonly found 'in poultry house litter, caves, areas harboring bats and in bird roosts.' Positive histoplasmin skin tests occur in as many as 80 percent of people living where Histoplasma is common."

Trend said she traced back several possible infectious agents in AgraQuest's patents to agents that were found in her son during his visit to the Mayo Clinic.

"Although different organisms have been identified in his blood and cultures, they can be traced back to AgraQuest's patents or their products. Some are traced back to AgraQuest scientists who worked there the same time my son did."

Yolo County Environmental Health inspections found two minor violations in 2003 and 2006.

"We do regulate the current facility on Drew Avenue for hazardous waste," Pinnow said. "I took a report of previous inspections. They basically had a couple of violations in the hazardous waste program - nothing that I haven't seen at least at a couple other facilities."

The violations included an instance of not labeling hazardous waste containers and failing to submit a waste disposal form (though the form was on file at the office). Other than that, AgraQuest has followed safety standards, Pinnow said.

"Allegations of dumping stuff is of one person. That's the only allegation I have heard," he said.

According to the statement from AgraQuest, a judge found that Bell's claim of injury was unfounded, a decision that was supported by a later appeals board.

Supporters of Bell say they are having a difficult time bringing this issue to the attention of officials.

"Your city, your college, your residents - you have a danger in your neighborhood," said Dina Padilla, Peace and Freedom Party candidate for the Congressional elections. "We don't know how far this danger exists in the water, in the food. We need to contact city council, media and Congress people."

Doug Haney, who says he is an expert on molds, fungi and microbes, has been investigating the case. He said he has been looking at natural crops as opposed to mutated crops.

"It's important that you pay attention to what's going on in Davis," Haney said. "The problem is that soil was being brought across country and county lines without documentation. That's what I'm worried about in Davis. When you have a mutated crop you can have a disease that becomes immediate, midterm or one that takes 20 to 30 years to develop, such as cancer."

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