

Valley farmers face state clampdown on fumigant use

By Robert Rodriguez

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A pesticide warning sign is posted in a strawberry field in Watsonville.

ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE

- Valley chloropicrin use

Application of chloropicrin in the central San Joaquin Valley has increased in most counties from 2010 to 2012. (Amounts in pounds)

County	2010	2011	2012	Total
Fresno	40,097	66,633	92,708	199,438
Kings	228	34,578	24,224	59,030
Madera	20,363	10,599	16,002	46,964
Tulare	18,033	22,120	33,752	73,905

Source: California Department of Pesticide Regulation

The California Department of Pesticide Regulation is limiting the use of a popular fumigant in the state, saying tighter restrictions of chloropicrin are needed to protect the public.

Fumigants are used widely in farming, either through soil injection or drip irrigation, to get rid of harmful pests and diseases. In the San Joaquin Valley, fumigants are used by farmers replanting their fields with fruit trees or vines. And they are used extensively by strawberry farmers throughout



the state.

Statewide, chloropicrin was used on 67,000 acres in 2012. The top five users by pounds were: Ventura, Monterey, Santa Barbara, Siskiyou and Santa Cruz counties, according to the Department of Pesticide Regulation. In the Valley, the growth of nut-tree acreage — almonds, pistachios and walnuts — has driven an increase in chloropicrin use, particularly in Fresno County, where usage more than doubled from 2010 to 2012.

But the fumigant can sicken people who are exposed to it. From 2002 to 2011, 787 people statewide were made ill, with symptoms ranging from eye irritation to cough.

Department director Brian Leahy said the changes announced Tuesday reinforce California's position as having the most stringent pesticide regulations in the nation.

"Once again California is ensuring that the communities where we produce and grow food are protected from harm," he said in a news release. "These new measures are an additional safeguard for nearby residents."

Under the state's new rules, anyone applying for a permit to use the fumigant will have to contend with larger protective buffer zones, a limit on the acreage where the fumigant can be applied and written notification of nearby residents in English and Spanish.

Currently, the minimum buffer zone is 25 feet, but the state's new measures will require a minimum buffer of 25-100 feet. The size of the buffer zone will depend on the type of tarp used. Tarps are used after the fumigant is placed in the soil to prevent the chemical from escaping. The state is also reducing the size of the field where the fumigant can be applied from 160 acres a day to 40. If specially designed tarps, called totally impermeable film, are used, the limit is 60 acres.

Neither the farming nor the environmental community was pleased with the changes.

Ann Katten, pesticide and work safety specialist with California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, said the state should have created larger buffer zones, especially when using the special tarps. State officials said the tarps are better at preventing the fumigant from escaping the soil, but Katten said the tarps are still susceptible to being torn or blown out of place. She also said farmers need to look at alternatives to conventional chemicals to grow their crops.

"We really need to start moving beyond fumigation and look at alternatives where we end up with healthier soils and reduced risks to the public," Katten said.

Barry Bedwell, president of the California Fresh Fruit Association in Fresno, said he is concerned that growers may soon be without an effective fumigant to use on their fields. Earlier this year, the state eliminated an exemption that allowed farmers to use more of the fumigant Telone than was normally allowed.

"Farmers don't use these materials on a whim," he said. "They are used to get rid of soil diseases and pathogens so that vines and trees being planted get a healthy and productive start."

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