

Pesticide use near schools triggers a push for statewide regulations

By Tony Barboza

Rio Mesa High School sits just outside the strawberry growing hub of Oxnard and is surrounded by vast fields of the juicy red fruit.

Jeff Elliott's twin daughters, in 11th grade, are on the school's track and cross-country teams, and they practice alongside neat rows of squat, green plants. But he worries that the chemicals that help protect the fruit might be hurting his girls. Elliott said his daughters told him at least twice that they sprinted through foul-smelling fumigation operations during runs near the campus.

"They're looking at workers in the fields with masks on, but they're just running right through it," Elliott said.

Curbing pesticide use near schools

Curbing pesticide use near schools

After a flurry of concern in recent months from parents such as Elliott, school administrators and local leaders, California regulators are developing the first statewide restrictions on pesticide use near schools. The move has reignited a debate about how to protect children from potentially dangerous chemicals used to grow strawberries, almonds, lettuce and other crops in the nation's top agricultural-producing state.

By the end of 2015, the Department of Pesticide Regulation plans to propose new rules that could require growers to implement buffer zones, notify parents and school administrators of nearby pesticide use or limit their use of certain application methods.

The action comes after government reports and news articles detailing heavy pesticide use near California schools. In some cases, growers were allowed to exceed state pesticide application limits, even as air quality monitors in nearby communities detected the chemicals at levels above the state's health targets.

8

Oxnard, in Ventura County, has been a flashpoint in the pesticide debate. Growers and representatives of California's \$2.3-billion-a-year strawberry industry are resisting the push for more regulation, which they say is based on unfounded fears. They say that extensive pesticide rules already ensure safety in surrounding communities.

Local activists, however, are demanding strict new protections from authorities, who they say have been slow or unwilling to act.

"This should have been addressed years ago," said Lucy Cartagena Martinez, who grew up in a family of migrant farmworkers and now handles campus security for more than 2,000 students at Rio Mesa High School.

Like most states, California has no comprehensive restrictions on pesticide use near schools and does not require growers to notify school officials and parents when they are applied. For decades, the state Department of Pesticide Regulation has left such decisions up to county agricultural commissioners, resulting in a patchwork of informal agreements that vary dramatically from county to county.

Last year, Ventura topped a California Department of Public Health list as the county with the most children attending schools within a quarter mile of the heaviest pesticide use.

The county has, for years, been a hot spot for environmental justice concerns, among them [federal civil rights complaints](#) from local families alleging that the state discriminated against Latino schoolchildren, exposing them to disproportionately high levels of pesticides. According to the [public health department report](#), Latino children in California were 91% more likely than white children to go to schools near the highest pesticide use.

20

The agricultural pesticides used most near schools, and most likely to be affected by new regulations, are fumigants, gases that are injected into the soil before planting to protect strawberries, almonds, sweet potatoes and other crops from pests and disease. The two main fumigants of concern are cancer-causing 1,3-Dichloropropene and chloropicrin, a tear-gas-like compound that causes skin irritation, coughing and headaches.

In 2011, the Department of Pesticide Regulation began conducting year-round air quality monitoring to assess chronic health risks posed by agricultural pesticides drifting into surrounding communities. Starting that year, a monitor stationed at Rio Mesa High School detected levels of 1,3-Dichloropropene above the department's standards for cancer risk. County supervisors and other local officials were incensed that they didn't find out until a few months ago.

After receiving complaints from politicians and school district officials, the department held [public meetings](#) in agricultural communities around the state to gather input for the new regulations.

This should have been addressed years ago. - Lucy Cartagena Martinez, on the need for protections against pesticides

Growers and pesticide applicators say that new restrictions will place expensive burdens on operations already constrained by encroaching urban development and the most stringent pesticides rules in the nation.

"Today's regulations are working," strawberry grower Bobby Jones said at a hearing earlier this month in the library of Rio Mesa High School, where his family has farmed the bulk of the surrounding land for three generations. There is not enough evidence, he said, "to support more regulations or restrictions based on probability or potential harm."

Many counties have informal notification or use-restriction agreements that have been worked out among local agricultural commissioners, growers and school officials, according to the Department of Pesticide Regulation. Some individual pesticides are also subject to state and federal restrictions on use near schools.

"We need a standardized, minimum set of rules," Department of Pesticide Regulation spokeswoman Charlotte Fadipe said.

Parents and community groups, citing increased risk of cancer, reproductive and developmental problems that scientific studies have associated with chronic pesticide exposure, are urging the department to adopt strict, comprehensive rules that will bolster protections for schoolchildren. They want buffer zones of up to one mile around schools and 48-hour advance notice of pesticide applications.

Pesticide regulators have downplayed potential health impacts and aren't indicating they intend to craft such sweeping restrictions.

Pesticide regulators and the state Air Resources Board have collected four years of [air quality measurements](#) in six communities and school sites near agricultural fields, including Rio Mesa High School, Shafter High School in Kern County and Ohlone Elementary School in the Santa Cruz County city of Watsonville. Officials say they have only on a few occasions detected concentrations of pesticides that exceed health screening levels and that their assessments have found the risk to children from fields near schools is low for most chemicals monitored.

But advocacy groups say the department's testing results confirm that pesticides drift onto school grounds and contend its scientific assessments are not thorough enough to conclude that there are few health risks.

Last year, the Center for Investigative Reporting, a nonprofit news organization, [detailed](#) how the Department of Pesticide Regulation had for years been granting exemptions that let growers apply more 1,3-Dichloropropene than allowed under the state's limits. The department [said early last year](#) it would stop issuing those exemptions.

State Sen. Hannah-Beth Jackson (D-Santa Barbara) had [introduced legislation](#) that would require notification of schools and residents in advance of pesticide applications, but it died in committee last April amid opposition from agricultural interests.

8

In Ventura County, where the agricultural industry is one of the top employers, some local officials are stopping short of endorsing such changes.

Ventura County Supervisor John Zaragoza said, "My biggest concern is about the excessive use of dangerous fumigants and the safety of our children, teachers and families." But he is not convinced that additional restrictions are needed.

"What is safe for the community without unfairly regulating the industry?" he said. "We need to create a balance."

tony.barboza@latimes.com

What is safe for the community without unfairly regulating the industry? We need to create a balance. - Ventura County Supervisor John Zaragoza

Twitter: [@tonybarboza](https://twitter.com/tonybarboza)

Copyright © 2015, [Los Angeles Times](#)