

## Community, Farmers Split on Pesticide Regulation

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Photo: Lily Dayton/CHR

**By Lily Dayton**

*Officials respond to push for statewide regulation of pesticide use near schools*

As summer wanes and students head back to school, farmers on the Central Coast are draping fields with plastic, preparing for fall fumigations that will sterilize soils before the next growing season. And if previous years' trends continue, more than 35,000 Monterey County schoolchildren will attend schools near fields treated with high levels of potentially dangerous pesticides—including chemicals that are known to harm the brain and nervous system, cause genetic mutations and disrupt hormonal regulation.

“I’m really worried about our students and how it affects their developing bodies and brains,” says Karin Wanless, an intervention teacher who works with kindergarten and first-grade students in the Pajaro Valley school district, which straddles agricultural areas in both Monterey and Santa Cruz Counties. Some schools within the district are surrounded by fields ranked highest in the state for pounds of pesticides applied, yet application regulations differ between the two counties.

Monterey and Santa Cruz Counties are not anomalies—there are currently no statewide standards as far as timing and method of agricultural pesticide application near schools, school notification requirements or school buffer zones. In lieu of uniform regulations, local agricultural commissioners set restrictions in their respective counties. But all that is about to change.

In response to the public outcry that followed a 2014 California Department of Public Health report looking at pesticide application near public schools in agricultural areas, the Department of Pesticide Regulation has started the process of drafting new regulations that will create uniform statewide restrictions.

The 2014 report revealed that minimal and variable standards throughout the state may be putting schoolchildren in agriculture-intensive areas at risk of long-term pesticide exposure. Latino children in California are disproportionately at risk of exposure to pesticides of public health concern, the study found: as the proportion of Latino children increased in a student population, the number of pounds of pesticides applied near their schools increased.

“The report didn’t surprise us because we’ve been aware for a long time of the pesticide use around schools, [though the report] generated the discussion,” said Christopher Reardon, chief deputy director of the Department of Pesticide Regulation.

About the new regulations the department is in process of developing, he added, “We know there are a lot of protections going on around the state right now in local counties. If anything, we want to standardize those—make them consistent and understandable statewide.”

The Department of Pesticide Regulation plans to release a proposed regulatory package for formal comment by the end of the year, with public hearings slated for early 2016. Final regulation is expected to come into effect in spring 2017.

To start the drafting process, Reardon recently went on the road with the department, traveling to five of the state’s main agricultural seats—Salinas, Sacramento, Ventura, Lamont and Riverside—where he led a series of summer workshops for growers, school administrators and community members.

“We thought it was important, because there was interest, to get out and listen to all the stakeholders,” said Reardon, speaking from the Salinas workshop, which was held in June. Like in other areas of the state, the proposal of new regulations has divided the agricultural industry and community members of the Central Coast.

### **A polarizing issue**

When a long yellow school bus pulled up to the Cesar Chavez Library in East Salinas, a crowd of teachers from the Pajaro Valley filed into the parking lot. Many wore gas masks on their faces; some were decked out in hazmat body suits. Most carried hand-written signs that said things like, “Protect developing minds” and “One mile buffer, our children shouldn’t suffer.”

The community session of the Department of Pesticide Regulation workshop in Salinas was more lively than the growers’ session, though the two separate gatherings were both emotionally charged.

“A lot of these schools came after landowners started farming around them,” said Norm Groot, executive director of the Monterey County Farm Bureau, speaking to approximately 100 people who attended the growers’ session. “It should not be a burden of the farmer if the school came after the farm.”

Groot, like many agricultural stakeholders in attendance, said that current county restrictions are sufficient, and that additional statewide regulations around schools—such as larger buffer zones, the prohibition of certain pesticides near schools and the requirement for advance notification—would place an onerous demand on farmers, decreasing crop yield, profits and property values.

“As a farmer, this whole subject really gets me because this is where I grew up, this is where I find my roots,” said Parker Jones, production manager of Providence Farms. A second-generation farmer whose strawberry fields are adjacent to Bardin Elementary School in Salinas, his eyes teared up as he spoke into the microphone at the grower session. His voice broke as he continued, “For anyone to think that anyone in this room intends to harm children, that’s really upsetting.”

But despite growers' intentions, Monterey County schoolchildren are disproportionately threatened by potential exposure to high levels of pesticides, said Cesar Lara, director of the Monterey Bay Central Labor Council. "We definitely need some changes."

Lara cited the 2014 report, which revealed that 25 percent of students in Monterey County attend public schools within a quarter mile of the heaviest pesticide applications in the state— yet the county's current restrictions on pesticide use near schools are among the state's lowest, with a mere 500-foot buffer zone for the application of CA-restricted pesticides during school hours. Advance notification of application is optional, and may be arranged between schools and adjacent growers.

"There is a standard of safety that that does not stop at a county border, and we have to have those minimum health and safety standards at the state level," said Karen Araujo, a member of the Safe Strawberry Monterey County working group.

### **A plea for protection**

Melissa Dennis, a third-grade teacher from the Pajaro Valley, stood in front of the podium at the community session in a bulky white body suit. She explained, "I'm wearing this hazmat suit because this is what I see regularly when I pull up to school."

For the past five years, Dennis has taught at Ohlone Elementary School, where an air monitoring device was installed on the playground in 2011 as settlement for a civil rights complaint that determined Latino schoolchildren in California have been disparately and adversely affected by exposure to both short-term and chronic levels of methyl bromide above the EPA's threshold of concern.

"This is environmental racism and it's unacceptable!" she shouted to a raucous crowd.

Many community members recounted health effects, presumably from pesticide exposure, that they've seen in students, coworkers or themselves. Some expressed fear of silent health effects—increased cancer rates, respiratory problems or reproductive issues they may face down the road. Others cited scientific studies that have found higher rates of autism, learning disabilities and developmental delay in children exposed to high levels of pesticides or children whose mothers were exposed to high levels of pesticides while they were in the womb.

"It's not just affecting the students; it's affecting teachers, custodians, everyone. We're putting ourselves at risk every day," said Marisol Duarte, a migrant education teacher in Salinas who suspects that her thyroid condition could be from pesticide exposure.

Wanless, the intervention teacher, walked up to the podium with tears streaming her face as she handed Department of Pesticide Regulation officials a petition with 450 signatures that were collected in only two weeks. Community members' demands for statewide regulation of pesticides applied near schools include a one-mile buffer zone at all times for all pesticides of public health concern, as well as one-week advance notification before pesticides are applied within one mile of schools or school bus routes.

"The wind blows right across the fields to our school," said Brett Knupfer, the principal of Ohlone Elementary School. "The little street is the only buffer zone we have." He told the audience that 520 developing children in kindergarten through fifth grade attend Ohlone, adjacent to strawberry and lettuce fields that are among those with the most pounds of pesticides applied in the state.

Knupfer turned to look directly at Reardon and other Department of Pesticide Regulation officials as he pleaded, "I ask you to take action for the students at Ohlone Elementary School — [give them] a greater buffer zone because they need it."

