

Editorial | Island Voices

Kauai's pesticide debate: Agriculture director's dismissal of report shocking

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CRAIG T. KOJIMA / 2013

STAR-ADVERT

A field operations manager inspected a corn field operated by Syngenta seed company on Kauai in 2013.

Demonstratic

Earlier this month, the Joint Fact Finding Study Group released its draft findings and recommendations regarding pesticide use on Kauai.

After exhaustively reviewing the available data, the study group described specific steps that Gov. David Ige, the heads of his departments, and others must take to “increase human and environmental safety” and “achieve the greatest possible transparency and public access to data while respecting information that must legally remain confidential.”

These common-sense measures include buffer zones around sensitive areas, monitoring pesticide drift, accounting for chronic pesticide exposure, and sampling air, water and soil.

Given the agrochemical industry’s adamant opposition to any form of protective regulation — suing counties that have attempted to enact it, lobbying against it at the Legislature, denouncing it in the media — I was pleasantly surprised that such a report could emerge from a group that includes industry representatives, as the study group does (a senior research manager at DuPont Pioneer and a site manager at Dow AgroSciences).

What I found shocking was state Department of Agriculture Director Scott Enright’s instantaneous, knee-jerk dismissal of the report.

Enright declared the report’s take-away was that evidence of harm was not statistically significant, and therefore any protective measures, such as the buffer zones the report recommends (and that Kauai Bill 2491 implemented before the agrochemical industry challenged it in court) are pointless.

This cynical spin might be expected from an industry public relations employee paid to defend a company at all costs, deflect all criticism and buy some time — and that’s exactly how the industry representatives responded to the report. But from the head of a state agency — Ige’s designated representative in charge of investigating threats pesticides may be posing to public health and the environment and regulating their use — it is completely unacceptable.

The study group carefully assessed and identified many reasons for concern that massive pesticide use by agrochemical companies may be harming nearby communities, water resources and wildlife.

It observed: “Chronic exposures, exposures to children, combined or ‘stacked’ exposures from multiple pesticides over time, and some of the compounds used as inert ingredients have been shown to have probable deleterious health impacts.” It repeatedly pointed out that data sufficient to reach definitive, cause-and-effect conclusions are lacking, simply because state agencies do not bother to collect them.

The study group noted, for example: “Environmental samples have largely been one-time efforts and no systematic collection of biological samples for analysis has taken

place,” and, “A lack of data on drift makes it impossible to fully ascertain possible exposures and gauge real risk.” Yet the report documented evidence showing pesticides moving off-site into our air, water and soils, where they are legally prohibited and threaten health. The study group sensibly recommended such data be collected so better analyses can be done and any further harm to Hawaii’s people and environment may be avoided.

Enright is well aware the report did not by any stretch of the imagination conclude no harm is occurring, but rather that his own department’s inaction contributes to a lack of data that might establish the extent of any harm.

He’s aware that pesticides are powerful, toxic chemicals annually responsible for many thousands of illnesses and injuries to fieldworkers and nearby residents throughout the nation and the world, and that evidence already shows these chemicals are showing up in air samples in our schools and in water samples in our streams and wildlife refuges. He’s also well aware that, as the report discussed, other states already have pesticide regulations more protective than Hawaii’s, which are obsolete. So for Enright to dismiss out of hand the report’s recommendations is unconscionable.

Enright’s response demonstrates the irresponsible, industry-coddling attitude among state officials charged with protecting us that unfortunately makes federal intervention in this area necessary. The status quo violates farmworkers’ and residents’ civil rights.

That’s why last week, Earthjustice and other groups asked the Environmental Protection Agency to step in and investigate the state’s mismanagement of pesticides generally and in particular, pesticide exposure of fieldworkers at Syngenta’s Kauai operations two months ago. State officials may be content to sit on their hands, but they will not prevent Hawaii from getting the protection it needs and deserves.