



Concern runs high about fumigant use

By D. Lee Taylor, April 13, 2016, USA

What state pesticide regulators wanted Tuesday night in Spreckels was input on three specific points they would use to craft a new rule on fumigant use. What they got instead was an emotional debate on whether pesticides and fumigants should be used at all.

The workshop, held at the Spreckels Veterans Memorial Building, drew well over 150 area residents. It was designed to solicit comments on three areas the Department of Pesticide Regulation is considering before moving forward with drafting new rules governing fumigant application.

Simply, the state Department of Pesticide Regulation wanted comments on the following questions:

- What would be the appropriate distance away from a field that would trigger notification to area homes and businesses before pumping fumigants into soil?
- How much time prior to application should neighbors be notified?
- What should the content of the notifications include?

“The DPR realizes some people don’t want pesticides used in agriculture at all, but this is not a forum to debate that,” said Tonia Carlone, who was facilitating the workshop for the department.

Few heeded Carlone’s words. Most of the several dozen speakers used the opportunity to decry the health risks to children and farm workers, or to defend pesticide use based on the agriculture industry’s ability to provide jobs and other economic arguments.

At issue was a subset of pesticides called fumigants. Unlike pesticides that can be sprayed in liquid or powder form, fumigants are gaseous and are pumped into the soil to kill soil-borne pathogens such as Verticillium or insects like nematodes that can badly damage crops. Plastic tarps are placed over the soil during and immediately after injecting fumigants to prevent the compounds from drifting in the air.

Monterey and Santa Cruz counties’ \$1 billion strawberry crop are the biggest users of fumigants.

The DPR is targeting three types of fumigants: 1,3-Dichloropropene (commonly known as Telone II or 1,3-D), Chloropicrin and three forms of MITC (methyl isothiocyanate). A fourth, methyl bromide, is not being considered because it already has stringent restrictions and its use is being phased out by international treaty.

All of these chemicals have varying health effects. The fumigant 1,3-Dichloropropene causes respiratory irritation with an acute exposure. Long term, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency lists 1,3-Dichloropropene as “a probable human carcinogen.” But questions such as how much exposure and over what duration of time would cause cancer are still being researched.

Mild to moderate exposure to Chloropicrin can cause severe respiratory irritation leading to coughing, choking, difficulty breathing or shortness of breath. Severe exposure can lead to a lung ailment called pulmonary edema that can cause fatal fluid buildup in the lungs. It was used in high concentrations as poison gas in World War I.

MITC is also an acute lung irritant. In 1984, in Bhopal, India, an accidental Union Carbide gas leak of methyl isocyanate resulted in the deaths of more than 2,000 people and adverse health effects in greater than 170,000 survivors. Pulmonary edema was the cause of death in most cases, according to the EPA.

“Our job is to provide strong protections from these pesticides,” said George Farnsworth, the assistant director of the Department of Pesticide Regulation, during Tuesday’s workshop.

But roughly 20 teachers from schools between Salinas and Watsonville used the public input portion of the workshop to deliver stinging rebukes that children cannot be protected from the poisons using today’s safeguards.

“Drifts happen all the time,” said Justin Matlow, a teacher who lives about 300 feet from a working strawberry field in North Monterey County. “The concerns seem to be money and industry, not human health.”

Growers and other defenders of the need for pesticides argued that school districts in the county have continually allowed schools to be constructed right next to working fields.

Mike Scattini, a fourth-generation farmer in the Salinas Valley, told the Department of Pesticide Regulation that regulators continue to pile up more regulations on farmers.

“California farmers are at an economic disadvantage” because of regulations governing applications of pesticides, Scattini said.

