Speaking out for safe strawberry fields

Jun 11, 2013 by Paul Towers

The hearing room in Salinas was brimming with people concerned about fumigant pesticides on Monday night. Dozens of concerned residents, farmworkers and farmers showed up to press state officials to protect this Central Coast community from the volatile fumigant chloropicrin — and to make good on the promise of safer strawberry fields.

Salinas is in the heart of strawberry country, so the issue hits especially close to home. Californians are speaking out at such hearings across the state throughout the month of June, submitting written testimony and sharing stories of how they've been affected by fumigant pesticides.

And these stories represent just a small fraction of people affected by fumigants like chloropicrin in California. More than 700 people have reported exposure to chloropricrin in just the past decade with many more workers not reporting for fear of retaliation.

Profiles of harm

I've had the opportunity to work with several communities over the past few years where people have been directly affected by chloropicrin, and seen just how hard fumigants are to control. PAN's scientists have trained residents to measure pesticide concentrations in the air near their homes, schools, children's sand boxes and gardens — and independing testing has found the contamination to be at levels linked to higher risk of cancer.

In one community outside Red Bluff, residents have continued to fight for safe strawberry fields. Manuel Silveira, leader of the community group Healthy Tehama Farms, shared his perspective with reporters last year:

> "The more educated we have all become on these fumigation chemicals, the more obvious it becomes that even when applied correctly these chemicals are too dangerous to be used.
>
> I think it is important to make clear that this drift wasn't the result of a freak occurrence, but something that happens routinely."

Fumigants like chloropicrin are gaseous, hazardous pesticides that are applied in very large volumes and thus difficult to control. They are used to sterilize the soil, and then drift onto farmers and farmworkers in neighboring fields as well neighboring residents. They're especially prevalent in the

California's strawberry fields.

The good news is that it doesn't have to be this way. Cancer-causing chloropicrin is just the latest fumigant slated for review and – if officials follow the science – phaseout.

Just around the corner

By most accounts, California is now on the right path to safe strawberry fields. Ever since the manufacturer withdrew the controversial, cancer-causing fumigant methyl iodide from the market last year, officials have renewed their commitment to safe strawberry fields.

And alternatives are just around the corner. Just last week, state officials announced they will be spending $1 million in fumigant alternatives and cutting-edge solutions, largely led by the state's academic researchers. Even in a tight economy, state officials see the need to invest in the long-term prosperity of California's agriculture.

While there's little doubt that Dow and other chloropicrin manufacturers will try to hold back these advancements, we're confident that farmworkers, rural residents and strawberry eaters will prevail.

At last night's hearing, Michael Marsh, an attorney with California Rural Legal Assistance shared this insight:

> "If we invest wisely today, we can support California farmers as they lead the nation in a historic shift away from hazardous and volatile pesticides by 2020, and towards safe fumigant replacements."

Let's hope chloropicrin is phased out soon, and other fumigants quickly follow suit. With investment in long-term solutions, California will be on the right path to safe strawberry fields.

Take Action >> Tell DPR to protect California families, especially children, from drift-prone and hazardous chloropicrin.

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