

## State agency fails to protect vulnerable communities from pesticide exposure

*Report finds Department of Pesticide Regulation receives poor grades in 2nd annual agency assessment*

Debra Tash on May 11, 2018.

*Oxnard, CA:* The state agency charged with regulating California's pesticide industry allows manufacturers to make up their own usage rules, continues to allow a brain-damaging chemical to be used on food crops, is slow to hold applicators accountable when workers are poisoned, and routinely ignores community input in its rulemaking process.

That's according to California Environmental Justice Alliance's (CEJA's) [2017 Environmental Justice Agency Assessment](#), which provides full assessments of nine key agencies and lists an additional six agencies to monitor. The assessment gave the California Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR) poor grades for its persistent failure to prioritize community health over industry profits. The agencies were judged on eight environmental justice principles, with a score of good, fair or poor for each. DPR's scores were evenly divided between "fair" and "poor."

The assessment specifically cited DPR for its cozy dealings with DowDuPont over the carcinogenic pesticide Telone, one of the most heavily used in California. Under pressure from DowDuPont, DPR in 1995 reversed a five-year old ban of Telone, and allowed the manufacturer to make up its own rules for its reintroduction and to be a key enforcer of those rules. Last year, despite public pressure to increase restrictions on Telone, DPR relaxed its cancer risk level in a way that allowed usage to *increase* by 50%. The Department also drew heat for its failure to take meaningful action on DowDuPont's neurotoxic organophosphate pesticide chlorpyrifos, which became California's problem after US EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt reversed a proposed federal ban. And the assessment called out DPR for its slow response to a series of drift incidents in 2017 that sickened dozens of farmworkers. Only two of the five incidents have been investigated to date.

"DPR must do much more to protect California's most over-burdened communities from the health and environmental impacts of pesticide use" said Adam Vega, pesticides organizer with the Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE). "Here in Ventura County, our strawberry industry continues to rely on vast inputs of some of the most hazardous and drift prone pesticides used in California. DPR must listen to communities and start exercising the leadership needed to begin the long-overdue transition to a safer way to grow food."

CEJA's assessment is the only one in the nation to evaluate state agencies based on the impact of their environmental policies on low-income communities and communities of color. Taken in conjunction with CEJA's [Environmental Justice Scorecard](#), which analyzes the record of state legislators, the tools provide an overview of the integration of environmental justice principles in state policy. Environmental justice is defined in statute as "the fair treatment of people of all races,

cultures and incomes with respect to the development, adoption, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies.” The idea that public policy might be shaped in a way that reduces the impact on the most heavily burdened communities has been slowly gaining ground in California.

While some agencies – notably the California Public Utilities Commission and the State Water Resources Control Board – have made strides in including environmental justice principles in their decision-making processes, others, like DPR, lag far behind.

A recent example cited in the assessment is DPR’s [new regulation](#) to increase protections for children from pesticide exposure at school. Despite a finding by the California Department of Public Health that Latino schoolchildren are almost twice as likely as their white peers to attend schools in the top quartile for nearby pesticide use, the new regulation doesn’t address the racial disparity in exposure. And overwhelming community concerns, expressed during the public comment period over the health effects of long-term, low-level exposures, fell on deaf ears: by design, the new regulation doesn’t address these low-level chronic exposures.

The assessment of DPR’s performance comes less than a month after their latest [annual pesticide use report](#) was released, which showed overall use of pesticides close to an all-time high. Use continues to be heavily concentrated in a handful of agricultural counties, mostly in the San Joaquin Valley and Central Coast.

“Rather than use its state influence to help lead California in a transition to safer and more just ways of growing food, DPR has overseen a sharp spike in pesticide use over the past two years, with carcinogenic and toxic air contaminant pesticide use levels nearing 20-year highs,” said Sarah Aird, co-director of the statewide coalition Californians for Pesticide Reform. “DPR repeatedly favors powerful corporate agricultural interests over public health, betraying those most at risk from industrial ag’s continued dependence on hazardous chemicals.”