

# County ranks second in state for ag pesticide sickness

Pesticides

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## California DPR releases report

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OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

**WATSONVILLE** — A report released Dec. 14 by the California Department of Pesticide Regulation shows that Santa Cruz County ranks second in the number of reported illnesses caused by exposure to pesticides among agriculture workers.

According to the study by the DPR's Pesticide Illness Surveillance Program of California's 53 counties, 67 agricultural workers in Santa Cruz County were exposed to pesticides.

That number is second only to Tulare County, which reported 78 incidents.

In the study, PISP epidemiologists identified 1,685 cases that potentially involved health effects from pesticide exposure. That number is a 19 percent increase from cases identified in 2012.

According to the numbers, 146 of the 796 non-agricultural cases evaluated as definitely, probably, or possibly related to pesticide exposure involved children less than 18 years old.

Of the 67 agricultural cases, none were classified as "definite," meaning that the researchers were certain that an illness was caused by an exposure to pesticide. But 37 were classified as "probable," while five were "possible." A total of 25 exposures caused no illness, the report stated.

Still, the numbers alarm local activists, who have long demanded a one-mile buffer zone around schools for pesticides.

"It is concerning to us that a relatively small county has such a large proportion of illnesses related to agricultural pesticides," said Lucia Calderon, organizer of the coalition Safe Ag Safe Schools. "Especially in a place where treated fields are so close to schools and neighborhoods, it is crucial that the DPR takes action to truly reduce the incidence of pesticide drift and subsequent poisonings."

The DPR recently proposed a policy that would

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prohibit application within a quarter-mile of public schools and child day-care facilities weekdays between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m.

The policy would also require growers to notify schools, child day-care facilities and county agricultural commissioners they plan on applying pesticides within a quarter-mile. It would cover application by aircraft, air-blasters, sprinkler and fumigants.

Growers who violate the regulations face fines of up to

\$5,000.

The regulations would affect approximately 3,500 schools and child day-care facilities, and roughly 2,500 growers.

The activists also point to a 2011 report published in Environmental Health Perspectives which shows that 82 percent of pesticide exposure occurs more than a quarter-mile away from the application site.

"A quarter-mile is not enough to protect from pesticide drift and illness," Calderon said. "To protect public health and make sure agricultural pesticide illness is truly reduced, Santa Cruz County and the entire state need

full-time, full-mile buffer zones around schools."

Pajaro Valley Federation of Teachers President Francisco Rodriguez said that the issue is always at the forefront in Monterey and Santa Cruz counties, which has a large number of schools adjacent to farm fields.

Rodriguez pointed to a report from 2014 that showed 23,706 pounds of pesticides applied within a quarter-mile of Pajaro Middle School, and Hall District Elementary had 9,568 pounds.

"It is a concern, and we hope that we can work with the appropriate agencies to address what's going on," he said.