



JUDITH CALSON — MERCURY NEWS

Dave Moeller, agricultural commissioner for Santa Cruz County, walks through an apple orchard in Watsonville. His job entails balancing the needs of farmers, who often use pesticides to help manage their crops, with environmental safety.

Bug fan balances environment with managing pests on farms

By Lee Quarnstrom
Mercury News

Dave Moeller started collecting bugs when he was a kid.

"I've been interested in entomology since I was 8 years old," Moeller says. "My insect collection has grown, and I still have it."

"In fact, when I was younger I spent three weeks in the rain forest in Costa Rica collecting insects for the Los Angeles Natural History Commission. I love bugs."

But not all of them.

Moeller, as Santa Cruz County agricultural commissioner, oversees the use of pesticides by local farmers trying to rid their fields of insects that threaten their crops. And in that role Moeller, 54, walks a fine line between

farmers who are often suspicious of government regulation of their livelihood and environmentalists who fear that pesticides threaten the public's health and safety.

To say that some environmentalists are skeptical of Moeller's decisions to allow the use of pesticides is an understatement.

At recent meetings of the board of supervisors, for instance, Toxics Action Coalition member Marilyn Garrett speculated that Moeller is all but in the pocket of the chemical industry.

"Nothing leads me to believe the agricultural commissioner is going to do anything to protect the health of the community," she told supervisors as she accused Moeller of being quick on the draw with pesticides. Her remarks

were made as supervisors debated how to deal with the threat of the glassy winged sharpshooter. That bug, so far a stranger in Santa Cruz County, has threatened vineyards and nursery crops in Southern California.

In a recent opinion piece in a local newspaper, Garrett charged that Moeller "approved these poisons, compromising our health and the future of the children. Shouldn't he be protecting public health, not corporate wealth?"

Yet farmers note that Moeller, whom some call a "crop cop," is dogged when it comes to protecting the health and safety of farmworkers and nearby residents after pesticides are sprayed.

"It is very clear to me that the ag industry has to reconnect itself to the community around it, particularly as ag and urban conflicts arise at the places where those two communities interface."

— DAVE MOELLER,
SANTA CRUZ COUNTY
AGRICULTURAL
COMMISSIONER

BUGS |

Balancing health, pesticides

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"When farmers want to cross the line," Dick Peixoto, the Pajaro Valley's biggest lettuce grower, said, "Dave Moeller is there to stop us. He's always ready to tell us, 'You can't fumigate here' when there are safety problems."

Peixoto, who uses both organic and conventional farming methods, said the ag commissioner "does an excellent job of balancing things."

"So I don't see how he could be popular with either side."

Moeller seems a little frustrated by the comments.

"I'm tired of hearing that I promote the use of pesticides for the chemical industry," Moeller said recently. "Our pesticide enforcement programs are unmatched. This county gets the highest marks from the state. If people have problems with pesticides, they should talk to Sacramento, where they make the regulations."

Managing pests

He said he is proud of the IPM, or integrated pest management, programs in Santa Cruz County. IPM calls for the use of beneficial insects — Moeller likes them — and other more natural methods of pest control that can, when feasible, reduce the use of agricultural chemicals.

"Dave is extremely environmentally conscious," Susan Mauriello, the Santa Cruz County administrative officer, said. "He is fully aware of all the environmental issues that confront farmers and has often been able to find some appropriate solution to pest problems that is acceptable to both farmers and environmentalists."

Stressing that many farming decisions are based on economics, Moeller said IPM methods and even organic farming are used when they make financial sense to frugal growers.

"When the ag industry turns to organic methods, it's not for philosophical reasons like it may be in someone's back yard," he said. "It's because of economics."

Moeller's official duties include enforcing regulations and safety standards when pesticides are used. An articulate man with a degree from California State University-Long Beach in zoology — special emphasis in entomology — Moeller is comfortable in jeans, cowboy boots and short-sleeve shirts, often worn with a bolo tie.

He is quick to remind that the pesticides and insecticides whose use he regulates are, in fact, legal. And, he insists, the chemicals are safe if directions and warnings on their labels are followed.

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Promoting understanding

Moeller said he believes that many of the suspicions environmentalists have about the agricultural industry, and especially about pesticides, are based on misconceptions.

"The community has significantly disconnected from agriculture in the past two generations," he said. "Many people who live in the cities — and this probably includes Santa Cruz — have these stereotypical views of farmers as clod-kicking hicks.

"Actually, farmers are much more sophisticated than many people realize. Agriculture is more than an art; a lot of skill and science go into producing the food supply.

"Until World War II, most people were involved in agriculture, or their friends or family were. But even though the numbers of people in agriculture have dropped, farmers still believe that the people around them understand farming.

"And sometimes they are shocked. They wonder why they are vilified, why neighbors of their fields are antagonistic. They don't know that that antagonism is often based on a lack of understanding of how the food supply is produced.

"The two communities need to get to know each other."

Moeller said there are programs that help people learn about farming.

"And it is very clear to me that the ag industry has to reconnect itself to the community around it, particularly as ag and urban conflicts arise at the places where those two communities interface," he said.

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