

California pushes forward with statewide pesticide notification system as Shafter project stalls

By John Cox

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What began as a Shafter initiative aimed at notifying local residents about farmers' plans to apply pesticides nearby is increasingly shaping up to be a statewide project that may or may not have a separate Kern County parallel activists are fighting for.

A spokeswoman for the California Department of Pesticide Regulation said by email Tuesday the agency is in the beginning stages of a rule-making process that could begin gathering public input this summer.

That doesn't rule out creation of a local version the state continues to push for in coordination with members of a clean-air committee set up in Shafter. That effort has come to a virtual standstill after a county official refused to turn over local growers' notices of intent to treat their crops with any of several cancer-causing fumigants.

It's unclear what the differences would be if two versions ultimately emerge. But local activists say both initiatives should proceed.

"Both the state and local projects are needed" because the statewide effort was designed to be a pilot study demonstrating the feasibility of a statewide effort, said Gustavo Aguirre Jr., Kern projects coordinator for the Central California Environmental Justice Network.

But an association of county agricultural commissioners says a statewide approach is preferable, mainly because it avoids DPR's "unprecedented" attempt to force a county official to turn over local notices.

The association has supported the position of Kern Ag Commissioner Glenn Fankhauser, who with the backing of local growers has defied the DPR's request to turn over advance notices of fumigation events, saying that information might be misused by anti-pesticide activists elsewhere.

"We do feel like perhaps a statewide conversation on this particular issue would be more appropriate," said Josh Huntsinger, president of the California Agricultural Commissioners and Sealers Association. He noted that "the conversation has begun" on a statewide rule that could take longer to set up than the state expected the Shafter pilot to take.

DPR spokeswoman Abbott Dutton said by email both projects will improve enforcement of pesticide requirements to protect public health and safety and enhance public transparency.

The agency is ready, she noted, to work with all community members and local officials to implement a Shafter pilot that originated in 2017's Assembly Bill 617, which gave local committees like the one in Shafter resources to come up with local air-quality measures.

The committee's work attempted to widen distribution of existing notices that farmers share with other farmers in order to reduce chances their workers might accidentally be exposed to dangerous chemicals.

But farmers and Fankhauser have resisted the group's push to publish farmer notifications on a state website. They say activists could use that information to fight farmers' ability to use pesticides. They have offered a limited compromise committee members have rejected.

Dutton asserted a local pilot would be helpful in informing the statewide effort — and that the agency continues to work toward the Shafter project. She noted the next step will be public workshops.

"We won't know the specifics of the proposal until we hear from the public," Dutton wrote.

Statewide notifications could begin quickly, depending on what the department is planning to do. But if the idea is ultimately to send out alerts to people who have indicated they want to be notified of spraying plans, that could take longer, said Jane Sellen, Berkeley-based co-director of Californians for Pesticide Reform.

Byanka Santoyo, a member of the Shafter committee who also serves as a community organizer with the Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment, said the local effort should carry on, and that state officials should force a local resolution, because it represents a hard-fought project for community residents.

"It should stay back rooted to what it is," she said. "It's a community effort."

Smoke from wildfires wiped out the U.S. pandemic-related clean air gains in 2020

Hannah Dormido, John Muyskens and Bonnie Berkowitz, The Washington Post
San Francisco Chronicle, Wednesday, March 17, 2021

Wildfires that charred millions of acres in the West wiped out the country's pandemic-related clean air gains in 2020, according to a report released this week.

Because pandemic restrictions limited travel and other activities, fine-particle pollution from the burning of fossil fuels dropped 13% between March and July compared to the previous year and dipped again in November and December, said Lauri Myllyvirta, lead analyst at the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air, who collaborated on IQAir's annual World Air Quality Report.

But the 2020 historic wildfire season more than made up the difference. Overall, the U.S. average for the deadliest type of air pollution rose nearly 7% over 2019 because of smoke from fall fires, primarily those in California, Oregon and Washington.

Fine-particle pollution refers to bits that are 2.5 microns in diameter or smaller, or less than one-20th the diameter of a human hair. These particles are tiny enough to penetrate deep into lungs and enter the bloodstream, where they can trigger asthma attacks and other lung and heart problems and may cause cancer.

While no fine-particle pollution is considered to be safe, the World Health Organization's about target is 10 parts per cubic meter or less. In 2020, the U.S. average was 9.6, and 38% of U.S. cities exceeded the target level compared to 21% in 2019.

The country's worst annual average was in Yosemite Lakes, Calif., 37.8 micrograms per cubic meter. The highest U.S. reading was 4,709.3 during heavy smoke in Weed, Calif., on Sept. 13.

In September, 24 of the world's top 25 most polluted cities were in California and Oregon, the report said. Leading the list was Happy Camp, Calif., with a monthly average of 154.4 micrograms per cubic meter. The city with the lowest fine pollution levels recorded was Waimea, Hawaii, with 2.2.

Worldwide, fine-particle pollution dropped in 84% of countries and 65% of cities included in the analysis. The company measured air quality at ground-based monitoring stations in 106 countries. About half of all European cities still missed the WHO target.

The country with the worst air quality was Bangladesh, with an annual average of 77.1 micrograms per cubic meter. All but one of the world's 50 most polluted cities are in Bangladesh, China, India and Pakistan.

Fire was not just a U.S. problem. Wildfires and agricultural fires significantly contributed to air pollution in Australia, Siberia, South America, Indonesia and Africa.

During a fire, the concentration of tiny pollution particles soars and increases the risk of acute respiratory problems such as asthma attacks.

"You might get up to a thousand [parts per million] in some of these places that are just downwind of a really bad fire in California," said Jeffrey Pierce, an associate professor at Colorado State University who studies the health effects of wildfire smoke. "But generally those only last for a few days or few weeks at most. What we don't know is, if you get hit by really high concentrations, is it the same as if you just took that and averaged it over a long period of time?"

For example, perhaps one large fire raises the annual average in an area from 10 to 20 micrograms per cubic meter. Epidemiologists are trying to figure out whether that is more -- or less -- harmful to a person's long-term health than year-round exposure to 20.

The working hypothesis is that they are the same, Pierce said.

Now that wildfires are becoming larger and more common while fossil-fuel emissions have trended downward in the United States for decades, a better question may be which type of pollution is more

toxic. Unfortunately, new research from the Scripps Institution of Oceanography suggests that wildfire smoke may be significantly worse.