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Editorial | Our View

Don't overreact to pesticide study

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A fact-finding mission to determine whether pesticides used by large agricultural operations on the west side of Kauai cause harm to humans and the environment found no smoking gun. So it would be difficult to justify spending millions of taxpayer dollars to implement all 28 of the panel's policy recommendations.

Yes, further study and pertinent data collection are needed. But the joint fact-finding group found there is not enough evidence to show that pesticides sprayed on fields by Syngenta, Dow AgroSciences, DuPont Pioneer, BASF Plant Science and Kauai Coffee make people sick or pose a significant risk to the environment.

The final report by the Kauai Joint Fact-Finding (JFF) group, released last week, has already ruffled the feathers of state regulators and experts in the fields of health and environmental science, who rightly said there was no basis for some of the extreme measures being pushed by JFF.

Many of the group's recommendations — from implementing long-term soil and dust sampling to revising federal pesticide standards — would cost millions of dollars each year and likely aren't useful, the regulators and experts said. Further, it would be irresponsible for the state to implement overbearing regulations simply because the group surmised that pesticides are causing undue harm.

The report, for instance, urges state regulators to make more strict the safety standards for pesticides set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), on the

assumption that the EPA's standards are not stringent enough.

The JFF also recommended expanding new regulatory oversight to any farm that produces food products, including organic farms and beekeepers. There are even duplicative proposals for the state Department of Health to conduct general air sampling, as well as the state Department of Education to implement school air monitoring.

“There is an obvious disconnect between what the document reports and shows and what the recommendations are,” said Fenix Grange, program manager for the Department of Health’s Hazard Evaluation and Emergency Response Office.

A wide range of health statistics were reviewed, including low birth weight, birth defects, developmental delays, autism, cancer, diabetes and obesity — but JFF found there were no statistically significant differences in illness rates for west side Kauai residents.

Cancer rates on Kauai, for instance, were similar to or lower than the rest of the state, according to 2000-2009 data from the Hawaii Tumor Registry. A review of birth weights in 2012 showed 7 percent of babies in Waimea, on Kauai’s west side, had a low birth weight, compared to 8 percent of babies statewide. Both are not worrisome findings.

Among the more reasonable recommendations, however, is one that would require mandatory blood and urine tests for workers who apply pesticides, to determine exposure and risk of toxicity.

Still in question is whether pesticides or stinkweed sickened students and faculty at Waimea Canyon Middle School in 2006 and 2008. The report recommends that the response to future episodes should include environmental sampling as soon as possible after an incident, which makes good sense.

Further, blood and urine test kits should be available for immediate use during any sizable health episode near large agricultural operations, to help determine, or rule out, cause.

Although the study found no conclusive evidence that pesticides are harmful on Kauai, in no way does it give the state permission to be lax in its oversight of operations that use them. Rather, government officials should exercise more vigilance in collecting data and monitoring workers for exposure so that future studies can draw from a larger pool of information.