

Hawaii News

Study fails to settle Kauai pesticide dispute

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Rep. Dee Morikawa (D- Niihau-Koloa-Kokee).

A preliminary study released Thursday that found no health or environmental effects from pesticide use on the Garden Isle was viewed as either good news or summarily dismissed — depending on which side weighed in on the controversy.

“It’s put that issue to rest,” said state Rep. Dee Morikawa (D, Niihau-Koloa-Kokee). “I think it will pretty much calm most people down — the ones who have been affected by the fear that we’re being poisoned. We have bigger issues right now to deal with, like Zika and vog. Our plate’s full but this report, if anything, has eased my mind.”

But to pesticide critic Fern Rosenstiel of Kapahi, the inability of the study’s authors to obtain detailed and comprehensive patient records underscores “exactly why we need better information. The report highlights all of the failures on different levels of government to get to the impacts on health.”

The study, by the Joint Fact-Finding Study Group, a team of nine Kauai citizens with science backgrounds, was funded by the state Department of Agriculture and the office of Kauai Mayor Bernard Carvalho.

It grew out of a 2013 effort by Rosenstiel and others to require Kauai farmers to better detail their pesticide use and regulate how they grow genetically modified crops.

Carvalho vetoed the resulting bill, but the veto was overridden by the County Council.

“This study came from the mayor who vetoes our bill,” Rosenstiel said. “I’m relieved to see that his own team found that we’re not lying. Lawmakers can’t stand idly by while our community is poisoned by pesticides.”

The study calls on Gov. David Ige to ensure that state agencies have enough staff and resources to fulfill their responsibilities regarding pesticides. It also calls on the Kauai legislative delegation to request \$3 million to implement the study’s recommendations, which include “buffer zones” between humans and areas where pesticides are used, primarily on the west side of Kauai where the majority of seed crop agriculture occurs.

THE STUDY also calls for new state standards on the effects of cumulative exposure to pesticides and recommends “a major update of Hawaii’s pesticide laws and regulations.”

In a statement, Bennette Misalucha, executive director of the Hawaii Crop Improvement Association, said the report “should reassure residents of Kauai that there are no serious environmental or human health concerns connected to the use of

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pesticides by seed companies.”

LOOK

The draft report can be found at www.accord3.com/pg1000.cfm.

SPEAK

Comments can be sent until midnight April 8 to jffcomments@gmail.com.

Misalucha pointed out specific pages in the report and said in her statement that the study “reported no evidence of harm to humans from agricultural pesticides (p9), no evidence of higher birth defect rates on West Kauai (p57), no evidence of higher cancer rates (p63,64), no evidence of harm to wildlife (p8), no evidence of harm to bees (p35), and no pesticides in pollen (p49).”

The authors wrote that they could not resolve discrepancies over reports of birth defects and other childhood development on Kauai between 1986 and 2005. But they did find that Kauai had no higher rates of cancer, other than a spike in melanoma reports on the island’s north shore between 2000 and 2004.

The study also looked at two incidents in 2006 and 2008 at Waimea Canyon Middle School that sent schoolchildren to hospitals, but could find no link to nearby pesticide use by various seed companies.

The state Department of Agriculture determined that teachers and students were sickened by a toxin found in nearby “stinkweed” growing nearby.

“At this point in time there is no way to fully resolve these past events to the whole community’s satisfaction,” the authors concluded.

The authors also looked at a January incident at the Syngenta Hawaii research site in Kekaha in which 10 contractors were taken to a hospital after they went into a field sprayed with chlorpyrifos before a 24-hour re-entry period had passed. But the study drew no conclusions.

JUST AFTER the Joint Fact-Finding Study Group’s preliminary report was released, the Honolulu office of Earthjustice and other groups called on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance to investigate “the recent pesticide poisoning that sent employees of Syngenta Seeds to the hospital.”

Paul Achitoff, managing attorney of Earthjustice’s Honolulu office, told the Honolulu Star-Advertiser that the JFF Study Group’s findings were “neither surprising nor all that relevant. It’s very well established that pesticides that are widely used by these companies do cause serious health problems.”

While the study asks for more money and state manpower to enforce pesticide regulations, Achitoff said, "The reason they don't have funding is the lack of political will. The Department of Agriculture and Department of Health have essentially deferred to the agri-chemical companies for political reasons over and over again. They simply do not take seriously the complaints of the people who are affected."

In a statement, Syngenta station manager Joshua Uyehara said the company has granted several media interviews since the January incident, but is prevented by federal privacy laws to disclose more information on the workers.

Uyehara said the company is "working with the regulatory authorities as they review the matter."