

September 12, 2003

California Environmental Protection Agency
Environmental Justice Program
1001 I St. 25th Floor
Sacramento, CA 95814

Via email

Dear California EPA Environmental Justice Advisory Committee Members:

I am writing to express the support of California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation (CRLAF) for the Draft Cal EPA Environmental Justice Recommendations. CRLAF is a statewide non-profit organization dedicated to providing advocacy and educational assistance to California's farm workers and other rural poor to help them improve their health, social and economic conditions.

I commend the Committee for its hard work and urge the Agency to adopt, fully implement and strictly enforce these recommendations. Below some of the recommendations which I feel are most important are discussed in detail. Examples relate to pesticide policy because this is my area of expertise

CRLAF strongly support the goal of working to ensure effective public participation in environmental decision-making processes and recommendations for making processes more accessible including developing guidelines and enhancing staff training to promote meaningful public participation and community outreach. It is particularly important to extend training opportunities to local governments to help them develop skills to communicate more respectfully and constructively with farm workers and other community members of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The guidelines should be strengthened to stress the need for local and state agencies to actively recruit multilingual and multicultural staff to be available day to day to conduct outreach and respond to questions and complaints and build relationships with communities based on openness and respect.

We applaud the goal of integrating environmental justice into the development, adoption, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies. In our work we have encountered disturbing regional inequities in the enforcement of pesticide regulations which need to be remedied. Improved levels of bilingual and bicultural staffing are needed to improve the equity of enforcement.

We strongly support the Committee's emphasis on the need for a precautionary approach in development of agency policies and support the statement "It is not always necessary or appropriate to wait for actual or measurable harm to public health or the environment before evaluating alternatives that can prevent or minimize harm." Over the past several decades increases in pesticide field reentry intervals, expansion in fumigant buffer zones and other use restrictions and withdrawals of pesticide registrations have been have often

come as a result of the poisoning of crews of farm workers and other rural residents. These illnesses could have been avoided if adequate precaution had initially been taken.

Assessing impacts of exposure to one chemical in isolation also falls far short of providing a foundation for adequately protecting public or worker health. This is particularly true in small rural communities grappling with both water contamination and air pollution problems. Farm workers ofcourse often also are exposed to multiple pesticides while at work. The time is long overdue for assessing the cumulative impact of exposure to multiple chemicals.

All too often when use of a highly toxic pesticide is restricted or phased out use of other high toxicity pesticides rise. In order to reduce this problem, we support the concept of adoption of feasible non-toxic or low toxicity alternatives through an alternatives assessment process.

We support the recommendation of centralizing all risk assessments in one office of the Cal EPA that does not have shared responsibility for risk management, product registration or process permitting. This will prevent conflicts of interest and allow risk assessors to maintain an appropriate public and worker health orientation.

We support the goal of improvement of research and data collection and in particular the need to make data collected about communities available to the communities, without violation of basic privacy rights, and to establish mechanisms to support community-based research.

Again, we commend the Committee for its hard work in developing these goals and recommendations and urge their adoption.

Sincerely,

Anne Katten, MPH
Pesticide and Work Safety Project
California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation
2210 K St. Suite 201
Sacramento, CA 95816
Ph: 916-446-7904 x 19
Fax: 916-446-3057