



Mary-Ann Warmerdam
Director

Arnold Schwarzenegger
Governor

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DPR SEES OPPORTUNITY TO CLEAR THE AIR

By Mary-Ann Warmerdam
Director, Department of Pesticide Regulation

A recent appellate court ruling reaffirmed that the state Department of Pesticide Regulation appropriately met its legal commitment to help clean the air. But the ruling for DPR also underscores that a measured, reasonable approach to environmental protection serves us best, in the long run.

This approach is more difficult than it sounds. For years, DPR has been caught in the crossfire between a few people who would ban all pesticides, and a few others who oppose any effort to control pesticide emissions that contribute to smog. Neither position is reasonable, nor is it in the best interests of our environment and economy.

Now we have reason for hope. The appellate ruling relieves DPR from a court-imposed deadline to drastically reduce pesticide air emissions across the state, without any regard for the impact on farm communities. Instead, we now find an opportunity to approach our complex clean air mandates in a more thoughtful, thorough way. But our ultimate goal remains the same: comply with the federal Clean Air Act and state air mandates in a way that minimizes economic disruption.

The first step toward that goal begins in Ventura County. With support from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the California Air Resources Board, DPR will implement rules to reduce pesticide air emissions in Ventura by 20 percent in the next four years, giving growers time to adjust. This phase-in plan replaces a lower court order that mandated emission cuts of 20 percent this year – even if that meant taking thousands of Ventura farm acres out of production indefinitely.

Our cooperative effort with U.S. EPA and the Air Board is based on the understanding that we will still meet overall air goals in Ventura today, and come into compliance with our pesticide air goals for Ventura by 2012.

In the San Joaquin Valley, the situation this year has been somewhat easier. Under state air goals for this area, we have worked with growers to reduce emissions without restricting their access to pesticides, avoiding major economic disruption. Now we must begin planning how to improve Valley air quality in future years.



Against this backdrop, our favorable appellate ruling is an important step in ongoing efforts to reconcile our environmental and economic goals. Unfortunately, it also is being misinterpreted by some as a complete reversal of state air policy for pesticides. Nothing could be further from the truth.

More than a decade ago, federal and state air regulators put their trust in DPR to use its authority and expertise wisely. In return, DPR agreed that reducing pesticide air emissions would be part of the solution to California's smog problems. Without that agreement, federal rules could have been imposed on California growers, likely without regard to our unique agricultural environment.

To renege on our commitment now would be both dishonorable and disastrous – for us, and for stakeholders who rely on fair and reasonable pesticide regulation. It would also be untimely, given the appellate decision that offers the chance to make a fresh start and resolve pesticide air concerns that have been on the horizon since the early 1990s.

We have reached a regulatory turning point. This is the right time and place to trade conflict for cooperation. To borrow an old expression, it's a good time to clear the air.

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