

EDITORIAL | ISLAND VOICES

# Protect communities from pesticides

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PIXABAY

Thirty-one states are protecting children and vulnerable populations from the toxic effects of pesticides by regulating spraying near schools.

[Senate Bill 3095](#) is described as “relating to environmental protection.” It should be described as “relating to the health of children and the community.” It proposes disclosure and notification requirements for large-scale outdoor spraying of restricted use pesticides, and buffer zones around schools to protect people — especially children — from pesticide drift.

The recent decision-making session on this bill had an Orwellian quality to it. One example was the Hawaii Farm Bureau invoking EPA's authority — yes, the Environmental Protection Agency that is under the leadership of Scott Pruitt. While we owe much to the EPA for its hard work over the years to protect the environment, its current head has been systematically undermining the agency's oversight role and rolling back protections. Yet the Hawaii Farm Bureau takes refuge in saying that the "EPA and the Hawaii Department of Agriculture (DOA) have the expertise and resources to ensure that pesticides are used safely." Alexander & Baldwin also confidently referenced oversight by the EPA and DOA.

The DOA head expressed "strong reservations" about requiring corporations to give 24 hours notice of any outdoor pesticide applications. The Hawaii Crop Improvement Association — representing the seed industry — cited the fear of lawsuits, and warned: "Why would anyone want to farm?"

That was enough for legislators. They moved SB 3095 along — but only AFTER removing disclosure and notification provisions. The voices of dozens from the neighbor islands who pleaded for the opportunity to protect themselves from pesticide drift did not matter. It was a sad day for corporate social responsibility — and an even sadder day for legislative leadership.

As someone who has had a career in a large corporation, I understand the capacity of businesses to do good — and to do harm. Having run a small business with all the challenges of meeting overhead, I understand the need to tend the bottom line. But those at the hearing who argued against the most basic protections for the community did not do anything to inspire trust in corporations or their willingness to value people and planet as much as profits.

Thankfully there were some inspiring exceptions. Kelly King, founder of Pacific Biofuels, spoke of farming without Restricted Use Pesticides. Her business, established in 1995, is thriving without endangering the community. What Pacific Biofuels does, corporations many times bigger say they cannot — or will not — do.

The proposed disclosure and notification requirements are not radical. Thirty-one states are protecting children and vulnerable populations from the toxic effects of pesticides by regulating how they are used near schools.

Those who protest the disclosure and notification requirements while saying they are waiting for direction from the EPA should read the agency's own document on pesticides and their impact on children. It points to the greater susceptibility of children to both acute and chronic pesticide exposure. Other scientific bodies have raised the alarm, as has the

American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Academy of Sciences. Numerous studies point to adverse birth outcomes when pregnant women are exposed to pesticides, as well as cancer in children, developmental disorders and diminished mental capacity.

If these sources were not persuasive enough, the words of a Molokai mother, lawyer and food safety activist, Keani Rawlins-Fernandez should have carried the day. She said: “The people of Hawai’i have the right to decide that the risks associated with the use of toxic pesticides in commercial agriculture are unacceptable, and take action to reduce and prevent the potential negative impacts of such use.” Actions such as requiring disclosure, notification, and the creation of buffer zones.

Clearly, our legislators disagreed. But there is still time for them to protect the people they were elected to serve. As long-suffering Kauai resident Klayton Kubo asked in desperation: “When will you DO something?” When indeed?

**Dawn Morais Webster is working with the “Protect our Keiki” coalition; she also serves on the board of Better Business Bureau Hawaii.**

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