

Study finds pesticide risk low

Department of Agriculture's findings at odds with claims of dangerous levels at school

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GAINESVILLE-- Pesticide levels found in a science project near South Woods Elementary School were far below commonly used risk levels, according to the preliminary findings of a state Department of Agriculture study.

Dennis Howard, chief of the department's Pesticides Bureau, told the state's Pesticides Review Council on Wednesday that his study is weeks from completion.

But the charts he shared at the council's meeting in Gainesville contradicted the Pesticide Action Network of North America's conclusion that the Hastings school was exposed to potentially threatening levels of Diazinon, Endosulfan and Trifluralin.

The pesticide network, also known as PANNA, said the highest Diazinon level found during the study, 900 nanograms per cubic meter of air, is well above the highest acceptable level of 180 nanograms. But Howard said up to 10,000 nanograms is considered safe for the general public, including children, according to the U.S. Health Department's Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

The occupational threshold for the same substance is 100,000 nanograms.

The highest level of Endosulfan found at the school, 626 nanograms, is above the 497 nanogram level PANNA considers safe for 4-year-olds.

But the Environmental Protection Agency has set an indoor reference concentration of 21,000 nanograms, and the occupational threshold is 100,000 nanograms, Howard said.

While there is no EPA level established for Trifluralin, PANNA found 376 nanograms, which should cause enough concern to call for more tests, the network said.

Howard showed that the one reference level set for that substance, the U.S. Department of Energy's Temporary Emergency Exposure Limit, is 25,000 nanograms.

St. Johns County Schools Superintendent Joseph Joyner, who hired a firm that conducted its own study at South Woods and found it safe, said he was glad to hear that the Department of Agriculture's charts have so far shown the

school is safe.

"It was unfortunate that people were prematurely frightened, but it appears as though the Department of Agriculture is going to confirm what we've been saying all along," Joyner said.

The original pesticide data was collected in December, about 500 yards from the school, by two Pedro Menendez High School students. PANNA, which is based in California, funded the project and processed the results.

PANNA lead scientist Susan Kegley has consistently defended the levels of pesticide contamination that PANNA uses. Those numbers are based on EPA formulas that take children's weight, developing immune systems and higher breathing rates into account, she said.

She questioned the Department of Agriculture's latest charts and the reliability of the reference levels it used.

Kegley said the U.S. Health Department's Agency for Toxic Substances levels come from a "flawed" 1990 study on Diazonin's effect on laboratory rats. She said she can find no record that an EPA indoor reference concentration for Endosulfan exists.

She also dismissed the U.S. Department of Energy's Temporary Emergency Exposure Limit numbers' relevance, since they're used only in emergencies.

Howard poked holes in PANNA's reference levels too, noting they are set for 24 hours of outdoor exposure to a 1-year-old child, a scenario he has trouble accepting.

Kegley said she uses levels for a 1-year-old because the air should be safe for the weakest members of society.

The interest in pesticide exposure has put South Woods in the spotlight for now, but Howard fears that it won't be a solitary case because an increasing number of schools are cropping up on the state's often more-affordable agricultural properties.

He's working with the EPA, the Department of Environmental Protection and the Department of Health to "put it in broader context" in case more concerns arise in Florida.

The Department of Agriculture, which also is investigating whether the cabbage farmer who applied the pesticides did so properly, hopes to release its full study by early June.

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