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HEADLINE: Viewpoints: Pesticides are critical to providing a safe, reliable food supply

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BODY:

Last year I managed to lose a tooth due to a sliver of a wayward pistachio shell. As a result, I have come to know an excellent oral surgeon in Sacramento who is Harvard-educated and has a wicked sense of humor.

On my last visit, he told me that he had just harvested his backyard plums. With a big smile, he said that because he had not used any pesticides on his fruit he did not fall under my jurisdiction. I asked him if he had sanitized his office. He replied that of course he had. With a bigger smile, I told him that he did fall under my jurisdiction.

Many Californians think of pesticides as something only farmers use. They don't realize that pesticides touch many other areas in their lives. We all reap the benefits of pesticides. They are part of the complex processes required to deliver safe food, water and health care, yet some consumers are reluctant to accept the risks required to create those benefits. When something seems foreign to us and we don't understand its benefits, it becomes vulnerable to attack by seemingly well-meaning people and organizations.

Thoughtful dialog around pesticide policy often becomes difficult, logic dies, and rhetoric and dogma can dominate the conversation.

Two recent Sacramento Bee newspaper editorials addressed pesticides. The first editorial ("West Nile spray calls for healthy dose of concern" ; July 25), which was about mosquito vector control, concluded that it is time to have "a public discussion about our reliance, perhaps our over-reliance, on short-term chemical solutions." The conclusion to the second editorial was much less nuanced. It quoted correlational studies that blame neonicotinoids for "colony collapse" of bees ("A lot is riding on finding culprit in honeybee deaths" ; July 27). It said too much time has elapsed between uncovering a problem and finding a solution.

Pesticides are chemical compounds that are critical to providing a safe, reliable food supply, maintaining public health, and managing open spaces and urban landscaping.

There are no current replacements that effectively deliver these services on a wide scale. So society will continue to use them.

Of course, there have been huge advances in the world of organic food (which relies on approved “organic pesticides”) and tackling pests with fewer chemicals (integrated **pest management**), but a world without chemical pesticides is still a long way off. This is why a thorough, science-based pesticide regulatory program is vital.

To decrease our reliance on chemical pesticides, we need a multibillion-dollar commitment to research and development in soil life and natural systems. It could last decades and require consumers to become accustomed to more restricted landscaping, crops and household products.

Pesticides are among the most regulated item in commerce in California. We are proud to have the most protective pesticide regulations in the world. But the regulatory system requires, indeed depends on, painstaking scientific research. California law allows my department – the Department of Pesticide Regulation – to act based only on science, not on current trends, opinion or fear.

The public increasingly wants instant solutions to complex problems. “Instant” and “scientific research” don’t make good bedfellows. However, the Department of Pesticide Regulation is committed to reassessing its scientific processes to try to reduce the time between uncovering a problem and taking action to address it.

New studies about the honeybee challenge seem to appear in the media every month. But these are usually correlational studies, which may suggest a relationship between two variables but do not prove that one causes the other. They are not the sort of studies that can be used by a scientific regulatory agency, and they would not stand up in court.

Scientists from the state Department of Pesticide Regulation, the U.S. EPA and the Canadian government are requiring more vigorous scientific studies from pesticide manufacturers to determine if there is sufficient evidence for new restrictions on neonicotinoids. More importantly, we have asked for a field study that should provide real answers to help solve the puzzle over why bees are disappearing.

In the meantime, we continue to make great strides in the safer use of all pesticides. So when a homeowner needs anti-tick shampoo for a pet or when a hotelier is confronted with an invasion of bedbugs, or a dentist sanitizes his office, they are going to reach for a proven, effective treatment. That is usually a pesticide that has undergone rigorous scrutiny in California, from a regulatory program that is science-based and follows the law.

Brian R. Leahy is the director of the California Department of Pesticide Regulation.

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