

Using Pesticides in California

At a Glance

- Pesticide sales and use are controlled by the California Department of Pesticide Regulation and by County Agricultural Commissioners in each of the State's 58 counties.
- Pesticide labels are your guide to using the product safely. The label is the law. This means that if you don't follow the directions printed on the label, you are breaking the law.
- To report illegal pesticide use, call your County Agricultural Commissioner's office. You can get the number and be connected by calling toll-free, 1-87PestLine (1-877-378-5463).

Pesticides are unique among toxic substances. Most environmental toxins are an unwanted by-product of another process (for example, outflow from a manufacturing plant or emissions from an automobile engine). Pesticides are chemicals *designed* to be toxic to a target pest and *purposely* introduced into the environment to do their job of managing insects, bacteria, weeds, rodents, or other pests.

Farmers use pesticides to control the pests that can destroy or damage food and other crops. Health agencies use pesticides to combat insects and other organisms known to carry disease (like West Nile virus). Hospitals use disinfecting pesticides to destroy viruses and other "germs" on floors and equipment. Many of us use pesticides to control pests in our homes and gardens.

While pesticides can be useful, they can also harm people, animals or the environment if they are misused or used indiscriminately. That is why the most desirable pest control

What is a pesticide?

A pesticide is any substance intended to control, destroy, repel, or attract a pest. Any living organism that causes damage, economic loss, transmits or produces disease may be the target pest. Some common pesticides (and their target pests) include:

- Insecticides (that are targeted at insects and other "bugs").
- Herbicides (weeds and other unwanted plants).
- Rodenticides (mice, rats).
- Molluscicides (snails, slugs).
- Repellents (mosquitoes, ticks).
- Disinfectants and sanitizers (bacteria, mildew and other microorganisms).
- Fungicides (plant diseases, molds).
- Wood preservatives.





Mowing your lawn at the proper height and fertilizing at the right times contribute to a more vigorous lawn that can out-compete weeds and resist pests.

Three inches of mulch can prevent weeds.

method is to prevent pests from becoming a problem in the first place. If prevention doesn't work and pests do become a problem, the next step is to choose the least-toxic method of handling it. You can get rid of weeds, for example, with a mechanical technique (pulling them out), a cultural practice (spreading a mulch over the soil), or an herbicide. If a pesticide is the best solution, make sure the product is designed for your pest problem, and always choose the least-toxic alternative. This stepwise approach is called "integrated pest management," or IPM, and is practiced by many farmers and consumers. DPR encourages everyone to learn about IPM, pest prevention, and least-toxic pest control methods.

You can find more information about pest prevention and IPM on DPR's Web site, www.cdpr.ca.gov. You can also call your county farm and home advisor at the University of California Cooperative Extension Office. You can find the phone number in the government pages of your local phone directory, or on UC's Web site at <http://ucanr.org/ce.cfm>.

Concerned about potential harmful effects of pesticides, California has been active in pesticide regulation since passing its first pesticide law in 1901. California's Department of Pesticide Regulation and County Agricultural Commissioners work with the federal Environmental Protection Agency to regulate pesticide use. These agencies face an increasing challenge: protect the public, workers, and the environment while allowing the use of chemicals to manage pests. Regulators need help to make sure we have safe and sensible pesticide rules – and to make sure pesticide users follow those rules.

Why do you say, "The label is the law"?

A simple rule: every pesticide product must have a label. The federal label law is strict. The label must describe:

- The pesticide's active ingredients (the chemicals that do the work).

- The target pests (the pest the product is designed to control).
- Instructions telling users how to make sure the pesticide is applied only to the target pests.
- Information about possible harmful effects from short-term exposure (the product's acute toxicity).
- Precautions the person applying the pesticide should take to protect themselves, other people, and the environment.

Whether the person using the pesticide is a professional applicator, a farmer, or someone in their own home and garden, he or she must read and follow all directions and safety measures stated on the product label. The label is the law.

Read the label first

The pesticide label is your guide to using pesticides safely and effectively. It contains information you should read and understand before you use a pesticide product. For how to read a pesticide label, go to www.cdpr.ca.gov, click "Consumer Fact Sheets."



That label is your main source of information on how to use the product correctly, safely, and legally. Using a pesticide in a way that is different from what the label says is against both federal and State laws. In California, farmers and other professional pesticide users must also follow extra rules contained in State regulations or required by County Agricultural Commissioners.

NOTE: Most labels do not include information about symptoms you may experience if you become ill from pesticide exposure. Two sources of information are the National Pesticide Information Center (toll-free 1-800-858-7378) or your regional Poison Control Center, 1-800-222-1222.



Product labels use three signal words, **Danger**, **Warning** or **Caution** to tell you the potential hazard of a pesticide. Read the label carefully to find out how to use the product safely.

How to read a pesticide label

Labels use three signal words, **Danger**, **Warning**, or **Caution** to show how dangerous a pesticide can be to people who are overexposed on an acute (that is, short-term) basis. Signal words do not provide any information about potential problems with long-term exposure.

The signal words tell you the potential hazard of active ingredients and other substances (such as solvents) contained in pesticides. The signal word is based on laboratory tests on animals that indicate the potential effects if the pesticide is eaten, swallowed, inhaled, or gets on skin or in eyes.

Pesticides with the signal word **Danger** are the most toxic or dangerous. Often, they will also have the word Poison and the skull-and-crossbones on the label.

The signal word **Warning** is applied to less toxic pesticides that pose a specific hazard to people, such as severe skin or eye injury, or a particular danger to the environment.

Pesticides with the signal word **Caution** are the least toxic to people and are generally less dangerous. But still handle them carefully, and always follow the label instructions.

Any substance – whether a pesticide, household cleaner or over-the-counter medication – can be dangerous if not used correctly.

What is illegal pesticide use?

An illegal use occurs when someone doesn't follow the directions on a pesticide label or doesn't obey California's rules. Anyone who uses a pesticide illegally can be fined or criminally prosecuted. This applies even to people using pesticides in their own homes or gardens. Farmers who break the rules can also lose their permits to apply restricted pesticides.

Businesses treating property must give the property operator information about the chemicals they will use and have the owner's permission to treat the property. For some pesticides, rules require neighbors be informed that a permit has been issued and be given an opportunity to get more information.

The County Agricultural Commissioner from the affected county decides if someone using pesticides has broken the law. The Department of Pesticide Regulation, which oversees the work of the County Agricultural Commissioners, also prosecutes some cases.

Under California law, controls on pesticide use begin before an application and continue after it is over. For example, if a rule requires that, after application, tarps be kept over a building, ignoring the rule would be illegal. Similarly, if an applicator does not get a permit before using a restricted pesticide, that would be an illegal use. And if during an application, a person applying the pesticide breaks the rules that, too, would be illegal. Any time someone using a pesticide injures people or the environment, they have broken the law and can be fined or prosecuted criminally.

Who does what?

Pesticide sales and use in the United States are controlled by government agencies working cooperatively at the national, state, and local levels.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA)

- Evaluates and registers (licenses) new pesticides before use anywhere in the U.S. Also evaluates and re-registers older pesticides.
- Determines the wording on pesticide labels.
- Sets the allowable levels of pesticide residue (“tolerances”) in fresh produce.
- Oversees import and domestic manufacture of pesticide products.
- Sets minimum standards for enforcement of pesticide laws by the states.

California Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR)

- Evaluates and registers new pesticides for use in California (after U.S. EPA registration).
- Monitors potential health and environmental impacts of previously registered pesticides.



Anyone who uses pesticides – whether a farmer, professional pest control company, your neighbor, or you – must follow the law and the pesticide label and be careful to avoid harming themselves, anyone else or the environment.

- Does comprehensive assessments of pesticide risks to all populations (workers, children, other sensitive groups) from exposure via air, water, and food, and in the home and workplace.
- Licenses people who make recommendations on pesticide use, and pesticide dealers and brokers. Licenses professional agricultural applicators and businesses and ensures they are adequately trained. (The Structural Pest Control Board licenses companies that apply pesticides to homes and other structures.)
- Determines practices to ensure a safe pesticide workplace.
- Sets statewide policies for pesticide enforcement. Oversees local enforcement officials.
- Reduces pesticide risks by encouraging use of alternative pest management strategies.

County Agricultural Commissioners in all 58 counties are responsible for local enforcement of laws and regulations regarding pesticide use. They:

- Investigate pesticide incidents and illnesses, and impose fines and other penalties if laws have been violated.
- Collect pesticide use reports. California requires full reporting of all agricultural pesticide use.
- Evaluate proposed use of the most potentially hazardous pesticides (“restricted materials”), issue permits for these uses, and impose restrictions as appropriate.