

TUNING IN FOR THE GREATER GOOD | Public concern leads to shifts in pesticide use policy and reporting

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County AG report Soule Park pesticide 6.23 MB

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Pictured: A stand of mature trees that have been impacted by drought and pesticides at Soule Park in Ojai. Source: Ventura County Agricultural Commissioner Report.

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Saturated by science. The public, politicians, important news and extraneous propaganda — science is coming at us from all points.

We have data about the coronavirus, vaccines, climate change, early childhood education, eating meat (as well as soy, gluten and dairy), the importance of exercise and of sleep, and the danger of stress. We are

told to balance our work life with play, enjoy family and let go of toxic people. Don't use plastic or styrofoam and stop tossing food scraps in the garbage (it's now getting composted, and that's a good thing). The list of dos and don'ts in terms of what is good for us and the planet are all around us.

But our minds can only process so much at once, and data, numbers, projections, formulations and percentages cause many to quickly tune out. This means that when regulatory agencies rely on public complaints — as many do, at all levels of government — some conduct goes unchecked or unexamined.

A tuned-in public, however, particularly at the local level, is valuable. Two recent developments in Ventura County have demonstrated that where the public is engaged, policy shifts are happening.

82 “accidental” deaths of trees at Soule Park

When several mature trees in Ojai's Soule Park were found to be ailing in 2021, it was initially attributed to drought stress.

In August of 2021, the Ojai Valley News reported on the death of over 82 mature ash, sycamore and maple trees at the county park (“82-plus trees are dead or mysteriously dying at Soule Park,” Grant Phillips, Ojai Valley News, Aug. 13, 2021). At that time, the county ordered soil and foliage samples be taken to Fruit Growers Lab (FGL) in Santa Paula for testing.

Ben Waddell, director of agricultural services and a horticulturist with FGL, informed the county that the testing results indicated a “combination of chronic water stress” and “warm, dry weather.” In an email dated Sept. 7, 2021, Waddell said the chloride buildup seen in the test “is common in situations where lawn is irrigated around trees.” He recommended that “deep irrigations” should be done to “push salts down below the root zones.”

But an email communication by a local scientist raised concerns that the trees were suffering from chemical exposure, which led to an investigation by the Ventura County Agricultural Commissioner's Office (VCAC).



The base of a tree at Soule Park.
Source: Ventura County
Agricultural Commissioner's report.

Parks such as Soule are managed by Ventura County Parks, a department within the Ventura County General Services Agency (GSA). Other county parks managed by this department include Dennison Park in the Ojai Valley, Steckel Park in Santa Paula, Tapo

Canyon Park in Simi Valley and Foster Park in Ventura. A parks department maintenance supervisor holds the state-issued license to use pesticides — including herbicides like Polaris, Cheetah Pro and Brandt Magnify — at county parks. All of these chemicals have specific use instructions for ensuring the safety of the person applying them and those who will be in the area after application, as well as to protect “desirable” plants that are not meant to be targeted.

“It is important to note that the AG Commissioner report states on page two that no violations occurred. All applications and uses did meet label requirements,” said Colten Chisum, deputy director of Ventura County Parks, responding to the Ventura County Reporter via email regarding the Soule Park trees. “Over the last five years we have averaged just over \$6,000 per year on pesticides. Controlling weeds and invasive plants is a priority for VC Parks and moderate use of pesticides is one method that is used to meet this goal.”

Chisum continued that it is a “common” industry practice to apply pesticides with the “intent . . . to prevent grasses and weeds around the base of the trees . . . [it] keeps mowers and string trimmers a safer distance from the tree . . . to prevent damage to the tree.”



Examples of abnormal growth in trees at Soule Park, Ojai, according to the Ventura County Agricultural Commissioner’s report. Photo: VC Ag Commissioner’s report.

Imazapyr is the main ingredient in Polaris, which was used in Soule Park in February 2021.

According to the manufacturer label instructions, imazapyr is meant to be applied directly to the foliage of “undesirable plants” that are being targeted, and that users should avoid “application to the soil in which [desirable plants] are rooted.”

On Dec. 9, 2021, John Mikesell, an agricultural inspector and biologist with the Ventura County Agricultural Commissioner’s Office, visited Soule Park to inspect the dead and dying trees. He was responding to “an email complaint from Jim Downer, Environmental Horticulture, Plant Pathology Specialist at University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources Cooperative Extension.” Mikesell reported that Downer’s email indicated “hardwood trees at Soule Park in Ojai were experiencing symptoms of herbicide poisoning.”

The VCAC report ultimately called the tree deaths an “accident” despite Mikesell concluding in the report that “Polaris sprayed around the base of trees at Soule Park is likely the cause of irregular growth and is contributing to the decline of the already water-stressed trees at Soule Park.”

Mikesell came to that conclusion after an interview with the Ventura County Parks employee who applied the pesticides. The employee told Mikesell that a tank mix of “Polaris, Cheetah Pro and Brandt Magnify” was used and applied “in a ring pattern to the weeds and soil around the base of the trees, and along the fence line of the horse trail.”

As part of his investigation, Mikesell also sent photographs of the trees and bare ground areas around the trunks of the trees to Adam Lambert, restoration director for the Santa Clara River Restoration program of the University of California, Santa Barbara. Lambert informed Mikesell that he was familiar with imazapyr-based herbicides (they are used in restoration work) and that the photos of the Soule Park trees are “consistent with imazapyr damage to non-target trees.” Mikesell also reported that Downer had shown photos of the Soule Park trees to Brad Hanson, a weed scientist with the University of California, Davis Cooperative Extension, who echoed Lambert’s impression that the condition of the trees is “consistent with imazapyr damage.”

The VCAC is the local body responsible for regulating the use and application of pesticides and the agency has inspectors visiting locations on a regular basis to ensure pesticide applications are being done correctly and in compliance with applicable permits and regulations. The VCAC also responds to complaints. (*Online correction, Friday, Feb. 18, 2022*)

While the VCAC report stated that the damage to the trees was “accidental,” Mikesell’s findings implicated imazapyr and its improper use. And as a result, the parks department has changed its practices.

“We have learned from the AG Commissioner that Polaris (because it contains imazapyr) contributed to the decline of the already drought-stressed trees,” said Chisum, adding that the parks department is “no longer using Polaris anywhere that desired plants occur.”

Interestingly, while Downer’s email is what spurred the VCAC investigation, the author himself did not consider it a “complaint.” Responding to inquiries from the Ventura County Reporter, Downer said, “My only involvement here was a diagnostic one to get things figured out. I don’t consider it my duty to check up on parks staff, that is for regulatory folks.”

View the VCAC investigation report regarding the Soule Park Trees online: [County AG report Soule Park pesticide](#) .

Pesticides – How much is enough?

According to analysis by the Environmental Working Group (EWG), over 32 million pounds of pesticides were used across Ventura County on agricultural properties from 2015-20. The study further noted that 70% of homes in Ventura County are within 2.5 miles of areas where pesticides are applied.

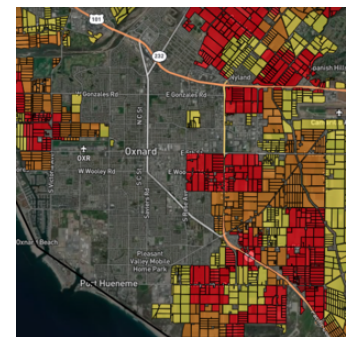
Distance from cropland	Residences	Elementary schools
Up to 0.25 miles	31,441	33
0.25 to 0.5 miles	43,088	27
0.5 to 1 miles	58,068	17
1 to 1.5 miles	35,240	17
1.5 to 2 miles	19,302	10
2 to 2.5 miles	10,763	6
Total within 2.5 miles	197,902	110

Data for Ventura County. Source: Environmental Working Group analysis.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) estimates that among the two million agricultural workers in the United States, between 10,000 and 20,000 incidents of pesticide poisoning are diagnosed by physicians each year.

As reported by Californians For Pesticide Reform, based in Berkeley, a report released late last year by the California Department of Pesticide Regulation found that two-thirds of people poisoned by pesticides in an agricultural setting in 2017 were farmworkers. That included 323 people, in 34 incidents. This annual report is issued three years after the subject year; the report for pesticide-related injuries in 2020 will not be released until 2023.

A new mapping tool created by the Environmental Working Group (headquartered in Washington, D.C. and with offices in Minneapolis, San Francisco and Sacramento) curtails this three-year lag time. The tool puts pesticide use information and exposure risk at the fingertips of anyone who can access a computer, and provides a visual representation of the data. Thus, anyone can use the tool to see that one in four homes is located within a half-mile of farm fields and 33 public elementary schools are within a quarter mile of areas where pesticides are sprayed.



The interactive map created by the Environmental Working Group demonstrating areas where large amounts of pesticides are used in Ventura County. View the map online [HERE](#).

“Agriculture is a billion-dollar industry for Ventura County and a rich part of the county’s history,” said Ken Cook, president of EWG. “Our findings show why state and federal policymakers must act to better safeguard workers and residents from dangerous exposure to pesticide drift.”

The EWG interactive map color codes the levels of pesticide use, parcel by parcel, across the county and pairs that data, sourced from the VCAC office, with information on health risks associated with the pesticides being used.

“This tool confirms what we have long suspected — that here in Ventura County we are being exposed on a daily basis to a vast and unregulated mixture of hazardous chemicals,” said Teresa Gomez, coordinator of Oxnard-based Ventura County Coalition Advocating for Pesticide Safety, part of the statewide Californians for Pesticide Reform coalition. She noted that many residents are not notified when spraying will take place. “That must change. As a matter of public safety and simple justice, California must make pesticide applications public in advance.”

The state is rolling out a pilot advance notification program later this year, and one community, Nyeland Acres in Oxnard, will be part of that program.

With the two new EWG maps, users can type in an address for their home, school or workplace and find out which pesticides and how much have been used nearby over a six-year period, from 2015 to 2020. Map creators used 760,000 records of pesticide use from Ventura County operations and information gleaned from 265,000 property tax records.

The Environmental Working Group mapping tool for Ventura County is online at www.ewg.org/interactive-maps/2021-ventura-county-pesticide-map/map/.