

# Pesticide drift sparks probe

*As health problems linger, state checks local response*

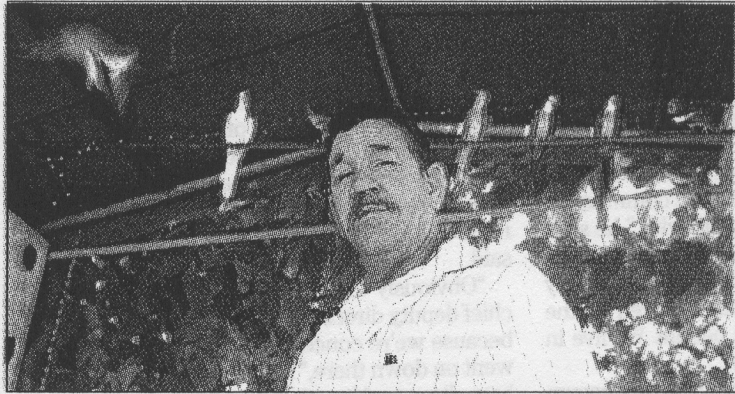
By **KATHRYN BAKER**

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ARVIN — Residents of a neighborhood that was enveloped in a cloud of pesticide that drifted off a field in July say they are still having health problems and that emergency personnel were dismissive of their complaints.

And the state Department of Pesticide Regulation is concerned that the local response may have missed some of those exposed to the drifting chemicals.

A state spokesman said the department's deputy director went to a meeting in Arvin last week, in part to determine what caused the pesticide incident, and also to try to find out why many people exposed



DAN OCAMPO / THE CALIFORNIAN

**Francisco Marroquin stands inside an aviary outside his home. Marroquin said two of his cockatiels died as a result of the pesticide incident in Arvin, where his house sits close to the field.**

to the chemical weren't identified until much later.

Several residents who attended last Tuesday's meeting complained that Fire Department officials who responded to their 911 calls were

rude, provided little or no information and failed to evacuate the neighborhood of about 30 homes.

"We didn't get no help whatsoever," complained Norma Serma, who

**Please turn to ARVIN / A3**

**Continued from A1**

said her grandchildren were sickened by the chemical drift. "They were more concerned of what it was than helping the people who were actually suffering."

"The kids have watery eyes, throwing up in front of the Fire Department, and he says he don't smell nothing," said neighbor Jesse Garcia.

Kern County Fire Department Deputy Chief Bob Klinoff said Friday that firefighters didn't have enough information at the time to tell residents anything.

Klinoff said he was not on the scene July 8, but was certain that Fire Department responders had no intention of being rude.

"Knowing the people that responded, that doesn't sound like them to me," Klinoff said.

"People's perceptions change when they're under stress," he said. "I would think if our guys didn't have an answer, they're not going to make up something."

As far as evacuating the neighborhood, Klinoff said it wasn't considered necessary.

"We don't evacuate just because there's an odor in the air," he said. "Most exposures to chemicals take either a direct contact with it, or you'd have to have an extremely high concentration of it airborne to be hazardous. It may smell terrible but it isn't hazardous."

He said the Fire Department contacted the agriculture commissioner's office to find out what the chemical was and how much of it was in the air before assessing the danger.

In such cases, Klinoff said, residents are told to turn off coolers and air conditioners, shut doors and windows and stay inside.

"Our health is at risk, too, in these situations," Klinoff said.

Kern County Agriculture Commissioner Ted Davis said his office has determined that Western Farm Service did not properly water the chemical after it was applied to seal it into the ground and did not post adequate warning signs.

The pesticide in question is Vapam HL, which contains metam-sodium, a fumigant that is injected into the ground to kill soil-borne pests before planting.

Residents, community activists and environmentalists met last Tuesday at the Veterans Hall with Davis and representatives of the Department of Pesticide Regulation to hear about continuing concerns about the incident.

Worried parents were told there are no statistics on long-term health effects from such exposure to metam-sodium.

"The only thing that's really been reported with this is persistent respiratory problems in a few cases," said Dr. Michael O'Malley, a medical consultant with the department. "Some people with asthma or lung problems like emphysema might have persistent symptoms."

Lupe Martinez, vice president of the United Farm Workers union, suggested establishing a fund to provide immediate medical care for low-income residents who are affected, many of whom have no medical insurance.

"That way, when an incident like this happens, workers or the people in the community can go and get medical attention immediately. Let the state litigate it and get them their reimbursement. So simple," he said.

The Department of Pesticide Regulation is expected to complete its investigation into the incident within a couple of months, said Deputy Director Paul Gosselin.

A similar incident in Earlimart in 1999 that also involved metam-sodium resulted in the evacuation of residents and sent 24 people to the hospital.