

In that case, the department fined applicator Wilbur-Ellis of San Francisco \$150,000, the largest penalty the department has ever assessed.

Russ Keegan, the Mettler branch manager for Western Farm Service, said in a telephone interview that he wasn't convinced his company was responsible or even that there was a drift in Arvin.

"We do take exception to some of the things the agriculture commissioner has been coming up with," he said.

"We are a very professional company that has an impeccable safety record," Keegan said. "We aren't in the business to poison people. We live in the community, too."

Regulation department spokesman Glenn Brank said that since 1999, the enforcement division has recorded 104 actions against Western Farm Service. Western is one of the largest pesticide application companies in California, with 38 branches, plus two in Arizona, he said. It also has 26 pesticide dealerships in the state.

Keegan said Western Farm Service is "huge" in California and that 104 violations in four years was relatively insignificant. He said the list of actions likely included such minor infractions as listing the wrong brand name on paperwork.

Brank said the Department of Pesticide Regulation does not rank companies by their safety records.

The agriculture commissioner's office also said in its report that unusually still weather conditions contributed to the drift.

The neighborhood northeast of Arvin is bordered by Tejon Highway on the west, Judith Street on the east, Russell Avenue on the north and Sunset Boulevard on the south. A Kern Ridge Growers packing shed on Tejon Highway was also affected.

Residents began calling 911 on the evening of July 8 when they began suffering from burning and watery eyes, nausea, throat irritation and breathing problems.

About 50 people were treated at the scene. One woman was hospitalized.

Community activists who organized after the Earlimart incident went door to door in Arvin in August and asked residents to fill out complaint forms describing their symptoms.

"I was outside and my throat began to close and my eyes hurt extremely.

My eyes burned so bad that tears just streamed down my face," reported Xochitl Garcia, who lives on Judith Street.

Francisco Marroquin, also of Judith Street, reported that two of the family's pet cockatiels died.

Brank said 99 complaints have been filed with the Department of Pesticide Regulation since the incident, about twice the number of affected people initially reported by the county. That number troubles the department, he said.

"Obviously the reason we sent the chief deputy director down to Arvin is because we're concerned about what went on down there," Brank said. "We have discussed it with the county, and they understand our concerns."

The pesticide department may consider developing its own guidelines so that fire department and hazardous materials teams have clearer directions on how to respond to pesticide drift incidents in the future, he said.

The Arvin residents who said they were exposed suffered a variety of symptoms the evening of the incident, some of which continue.

Efren Alvarez said through an interpreter that he was in the yard with his children when their eyes began to burn. He said his brother tried to wash the chemical off, but that only made it worse.

Alvarez said his 9-year-old son's asthma got worse after the exposure and his 18-year-old daughter suffered from rashes.

Roman and Martina Cazares said through an interpreter that their children still suffer from blurred vision, and they now become frightened by any unusual odor.

"The bottom line is, someone wasn't following the rules," said Gosselin, adding that the pesticide department "is going to be looking to take very strong enforcement action."

Community and environmental activists who attended the meeting suggested increasing buffer zones or banning certain chemicals.

But Davis said Kern County's buffer zones and other permit requirements are at times even more stringent than those set out by state regulations.

"This was a misapplication," Davis said. "We have a number of, dozens of applications that go on during the summer months without any incidents whatsoever."