CALIFORNIA STRAWBERRY COMMISSION

May 5, 2025

Jennifer 'JT' Teerlink, PhD.
Deputy Director and Science Advisor
California Department of Pesticide Regulations
California Environmental Protection Agency
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Comments in Response to the Department of Pesticide Regulation's Proposed Pesticide Prioritization Process

Dear Dr. Teerlink,

We want to express our appreciation for hosting the public workshop on the pesticide prioritization process on April 8, 2025, in Sacramento. We value the opportunity to participate in-person and virtually and commend your clear and informative presentation of the pesticide prioritization process. We also appreciate you and your team's commitment to gathering and considering public feedback, essential for inclusive and democratic decision-making. Please accept this comment letter with our thoughts and comments on behalf of California's strawberry growers, processors, and shippers.

The California Strawberry Commission (CSC) represents California's family farmers, shippers, and processors of strawberries. California strawberry farmers are responsible for nearly 90 percent of the U.S.-produced strawberry fruit and over 50,000 jobs. Strawberry production is one of the most important crops in California, and it is exported throughout the nation and the world. It is likely one of the crops that supports the global agricultural economy, helping position California as the world's fourth-largest economy. However, in the last decade, agriculture, including strawberry production, has been impacted by various factors, including climate change, that may affect its future viability. Several studies, in the last 5 years, have pointed out that although public health and good nutrition rely on healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables, the concept of ensuring healthy plants has been set aside. Healthy plants rely on a holistic and sustainable approach to pest management, which includes the use of pesticides, plant growth regulators, and pest repellents, among others. Otherwise, the increasing threats from invasive pests from agricultural imports and travelers will threaten the availability of healthy plants, ultimately impacting our access to nutritious fruits and vegetables. CSC supports the Department of Pesticide Regulation's (DPR) initiative for Sustainable Pest Management (SPM) and hopes to collaborate with the DPR in its thoughtful and informed implementation of the process.

We thank you for hosting the recent April 8th, Pesticide Prioritization workshop and presenting on the process for pesticide prioritization as part of the DPR's SPM Initiative. We appreciate the Department's efforts to engage with all stakeholders and the opportunity to comment on the process, as it demonstrates the department's efforts on transparency.

We were pleased to see the DPR's commitment to a "data-driven, transparent and coordinated approach" to identify potential priority pesticides and mitigate human health and environmental risks. We also appreciate the efforts to engage with all stakeholders, ensuring transparent communication on these processes and decisions, including establishing an external Science Advisory Committee comprised of experts in various disciplines. The following are specific comments based on the categories presented during the workshop.

P. O. Box 269
Watsonville, CA 95077

Phone: 831.724.1301
Fax: 831.724.5973

www.CalStrawberry.com
www.CaliforniaStrawberries.com

Prioritization Process and Structure for submission of potential priorities

1) AB 2113 amended Section 12798(c) of the Food and Agriculture Code regarding a Pest Management Research Committee. On slide 8 of the Department's presentation, it was unclear which of the six committees the Pest Management Research Committee referred to as described in AB 2113. Further clarification and naming of one of the committees as the "Pest Management Research Committee" would be helpful to avoid confusion amongst stakeholders and the public.

2) According to the presentation, identifying potential priority pesticides that will undergo an evaluation by the Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) will be derived from DPR staff-generated and public-identified potential priorities. According to slide 14, those lists of potential priorities will have to be supported by various data (monitoring data, human health data, and environmental toxicity data). We agree that both staff-generated and public-identified potential priorities should be well supported by data. We also suggest making this statement clearer by saying "scientific data" so that the data is collected using the scientific method of establishing a hypothesis and working to support the hypothesis with data. Further details on the type of data and examples would be helpful for future discussions regarding the process of pesticide prioritization as part of SPM.

3) It would be helpful if the Department clarifies whether the concept of public-identified science data collection will be considered for potential pesticide prioritization or if the "data" must be connected to an academic institution. As you know, data collected through academic institutions meets certain statistical standards, while publicly identified science data may not.

4) DPR has, over the years, used risk assessment to identify and quantify pesticide-related risks as part of its continuous evaluation process. Is this pesticide prioritization process a part of the continuous evaluation process?

5) As part of the plan to discuss potential priority pesticides, the presentation noted that there will be up to eight different potential priority pesticides for discussion that are proposed by the DPR, SAC, and the public (slide 16). AB 2113 (2024, Garcia) mandates the DPR to, currently, reevaluate one pesticide per year and then, starting in 2029, reevaluate two pesticides a year. It was unclear how the eight potential priorities tie into the number of mandated reevaluations and if the DPR could potentially take up to a total of ten reevaluations per year. We hope that more clarity can be offered on how the potential pesticide priorities come through the Department, Scientific Advisory Committee, and public connect to the AB 2113-mandated reevaluations.

6) On slide 17 of the presentation, the difference between a “potential priority pesticide” and a “priority pesticide” was unclear. The flowchart begins by introducing a ‘Potential Priority’ and asks: Are potential risks identified with sufficient data and quality scientific assessment? This question has a minimum of three answers, starting with whether there is sufficient data and a quality scientific assessment (subjective) available? If the answer is “yes”, then one can continue and ask whether there are potential risks, Yes/No. If yes, then this ‘Potential Priority’ elevates to become a ‘Priority’ pesticide. If “no”, then the ‘Potential Priority’ is deemed safe and removed from the process. If sufficient data and quality scientific assessment does not exist, then further studies and/or data collection are necessary before a determination can be made. Is this assumption correct based on the flow chart?

7) Also, on the bottom of slide 17, it states that in certain cases where actions are taken, DPR may cancel a specific product. It would be beneficial to add to this process another step (past the DPR action of cancellation or reference back to DPR actions for expedited registration of alternatives and supported research) where DPR evaluates if there are feasible alternatives prior to the cancellation of a product. For

P. O. Box 269
Watsonville, CA 95077
Phone: 831.724.1301
Fax: 831.724.5973
www.CalStrawberry.com
www.CaliforniaStrawberries.com

example, the Department may inquire with pesticide registrants if there are any alternatives in development to replace the product to be cancelled. In cases where there are no alternatives, the pesticide to be cancelled could potentially be used as a restricted use material with further management practice guidelines to prevent environmental and human harm concerns. This process can potentially eliminate the loss of rural jobs and economic impacts that stem from removing pest control agents from agricultural use. We propose that, rather than the DPR action to cancel a specific product, there are arrows after or to the side of the box that reference the two other DPR actions listed: "Develop mitigation and Expedite registration of alternatives, Support research on alternatives". This will show how the actions are connected rather than standalone functions and provide greater transparency to stakeholders and the public on how the Department functions in a collaborative manner rather than a siloed approach.

Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) areas of expertise

1) The SAC does not appear to sufficiently represent relevant and knowledgeable agricultural disciplines. Arguably, most pesticide use is associated with pest and disease management in agriculture, and agricultural use seems to be primarily how the Sustainable Pest Management Initiative of DPR was formulated. It is commendable and appropriate that DPR desires PhD-level scientists on the SAC. However, representation for many of the disciplines in the proposed list will likely be drawn from academia or government scientists, who may have little experience in agricultural pest management. The typical reasoning for selecting PhD-level scientists is the belief that this group will provide an “unbiased” scientific assessment or opinion. It has been our observation that individuals with the highest level of knowledge and experience with agricultural pesticides – generally practitioners – are excluded from sitting on DPR committees in favor of an academic with no practical experience and/or limited knowledge. We believe the tradeoff of experience and knowledge for an uninformed “unbiased” opinion does little to serve DPR's goal of making the best decision.

2) The research, testing, and regulations surrounding pesticide development in agriculture is a highly structured process often unappreciated by the general public (non-agricultural scientists included). It was not clear from the presentation how much influence or impact the SAC will have in the prioritization process, but a committee well-informed on pesticide use in agriculture (regardless of their discipline) could provide a solid foundation for making these important decisions.

3) Currently, there are 11 categories listed for the SAC on slide 20 of the presentation. However, the previous slide shows that there are 15 members. It would be helpful to identify which categories could have more than one member.

4) Alternatively, we propose adding several additional categories. It would benefit the SAC to have three members who are experts on food security, nutrition, and agricultural economics. These topics tie closely into why the agriculture sector uses pest control products in the first place and would provide useful information on existing needs, alternatives, and research. These topics are of significant concern in light of climate change, which impacts food security at the local and national levels.

5) All committee members should have a strong tie to California agriculture, an understanding of pest/disease management, and preferably, experience with the use of pesticides.

6) Committee members with a regulatory background and a registrant background are needed so that they may inform the full committee on the processes involved in data generation, collection, and registration.

P. O. Box 269
Watsonville, CA 95077

Phone: 831.724.1301
Fax: 831.724.5973

www.CalStrawberry.com
www.CaliforniaStrawberries.com

CALIFORNIA STRAWBERRY COMMISSION

The California strawberry industry has dedicated millions of research dollars on innovation to foster sustainability and resource efficiency. Our fundamental and applied research has actualized significant contributions to sustainable farming. Studies are conducted in both academic and commercial fields, providing our industry with a more comprehensive understanding of capacities to achievable sustainability. It is well documented that California strawberry farmers have invested more research funding than any other farm group in the country in search of solutions that address problems related to soil-borne diseases.

We look forward to more discussions and engagement with the DPR on the prioritization process and the selection of the members of the SAC as these processes will likely have an impact on the pest management practices and tools in our industry.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments and if you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach out to me directly at agunasekara@calstrawberry.org or 831-724-1301.

Best regards,
Amrith "Ami" Gunasekara
Director of Regulatory Affairs

P. O. Box 269
Watsonville, CA 95077

Phone: 831.724.1301
Fax: 831.724.5973

www.CalStrawberry.com
www.CaliforniaStrawberries.com