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Bitter living through chemistry

for itself, like passing Proposition 65, which requires full disclosure of the contents and risks of toxic products.

NOW environmentalists have launched a long hoped-for, new referendum: "Big Green," which would require that 23 widely used farm chemicals be phased out by 1996.

CALIFORNIA HAS a rating we should be terrified about. The state tops the nation in the pounds of pesticides and agricultural chemicals used per person per year. We're number one — and we're being poisoned.

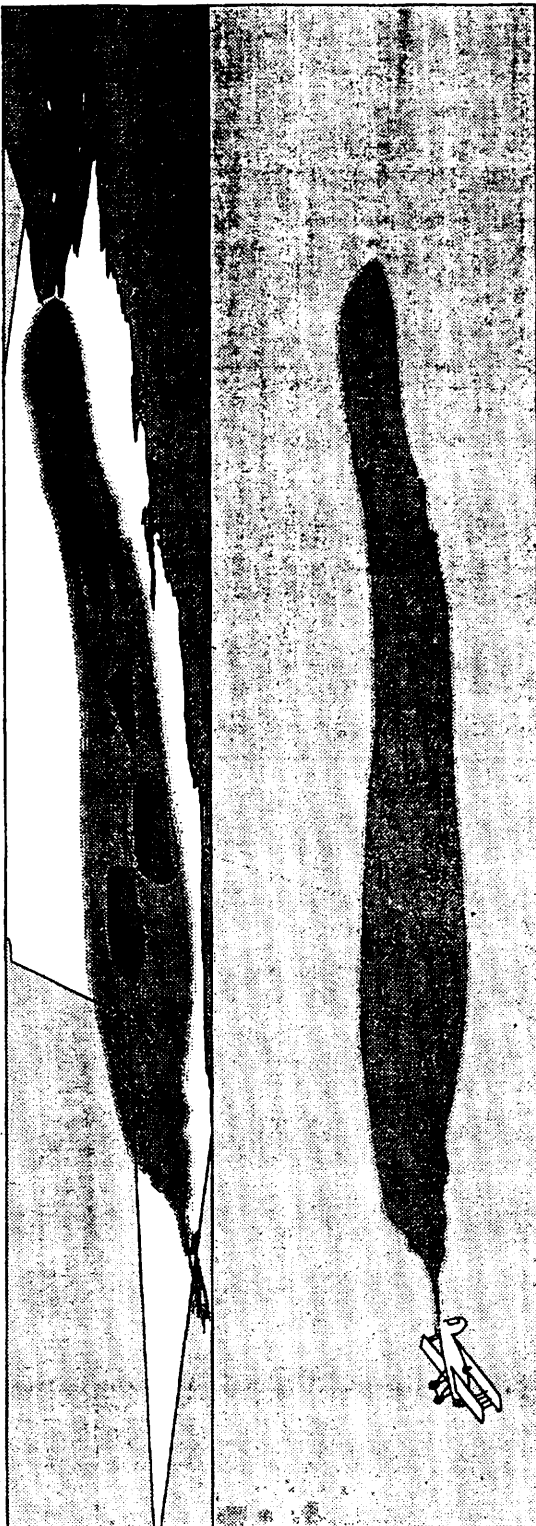
Pesticides are poisons made to kill, and even traces of them can make people and the environment terribly ill. And through practices such as the overuse of agricultural chemicals and pesticides, increasing numbers of people are contracting cancer.

How does this happen and why is it allowed to happen? Those government agencies that are supposed to oversee toxic use are doing a poor job of it, and our leaders have failed to push for improvement. I have to point to the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA), and Governor Deukmejian.

A recent study by the Senate Office of Research in Sacramento reviewed all the pesticide products registered from March to December 1987 and found that even though state scientists recommended against allowing a new chemical to be sold in California for health safety reasons, on 21 occasions Deukmejian's people overruled them and the stuff went on the market. A subsequent CDFA audit, showed the process was even worse.

WE ARE BEING poisoned because big profits make the manipulation of laws

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and restrictions a top lobbying priority in government.

One example is the secret meeting process of getting clearance to introduce new chemicals. Chemical companies that want to introduce a new agricultural chemical on the market in California present it to a small committee representing four different state agencies. The committee meets in secret with company representatives. This occurs behind closed doors, no press and no public allowed.

This secretive process of chemical regulation should either be opened to the public and media or be abolished.

False public relations is a problem, too. Chemical producers have told Americans that growing food with the aid of pesticides and agricultural chemicals is necessary for needed production and the economy. Hogwash. That is being refuted continuously now.

The famous 1989 National Academy of Sciences report, for example, was critical of chemical agriculture. It was an unusual action for that prestigious conservative body.

Half the toxics used by growers are to maintain flawless appearance and have little to do with production. Look at the produce in any

organic produce food store — oranges for instance. That fruit is delicious though its skin may be bumpy or have some spots. America can do without being poisoned for cosmetic reasons.

What is needed is to change the law and regulations. But that means political leadership with integrity. It's repulsive to see Gov. Deukmejian on nationwide TV assuring viewers that the weekly spraying of Los Angeles with Malathion in the silly "Madfly Wars" is safe and only a slight discomfort to the people there.

Fortunately, what the government won't do, the public is doing

A way to get involved is to support non government organizations that are working to make a difference. Among them are: The Pesticide Action Network, Citizens For A Better Environment, EDF, NRDG, The National Toxics Campaign in San Jose, The Clean Water Initiative, Sierra Club, the Audubon Society, the National Wildlife Federation, and Greenpeace. Numerous local groups are taking on toxics, too.

Join one or more of them. They are organizing and educating the voting public, and beginning to affect government at all levels. It seems to be our best hope.