WHO PAYS THE WATCHDOG?

The poison pays its own police.

BY KARA BELL · LIFELESSTOXIC.COM



Photo: a landscaping crew applying product along a road median in Ladera Ranch, CA

California's pesticide regulators are funded by the chemical companies they are supposed to police. That single fact runs through every piece of this story: from a Ladera Ranch sidewalk in 2019 to a Sacramento hearing room in 2026.

~97%	21 → 30	$18M
of DPR's funding is fees the pesticide industry itself pays: mill tax + registration + licensing fees	mills per dollar of sales — the pesticide tax rate DPR runs on, now climbing under AB 2113	DPR told lawmakers it would lose eighteen million in fees if a 2026 ban on PFAS pesticides passed

What's a "mill"? *Think of a dollar cut into 1,000 tiny pieces — each piece is one mill, or one-tenth of a cent. A tax of 29 mills means the state collects 29 of those 1,000 pieces (about 2.9¢) on every $1 of pesticide sold. It sounds small but multiplied across billions of dollars in pesticide sales a year, it funds almost the entire agency.*

The Funding Conflict

The Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR) and county agricultural commissioners run almost entirely on fees paid by the industry they regulate: 79% from the mill assessment (the per-dollar sales tax above), 16% from pesticide registration fees, and 2% from licensing and certification fees — 97% of the whole budget, according to the state's own accounting.

The more product moves, the more the regulator collects. Finding fewer violations, not more, keeps that revenue flowing without disruption. In 2024, AB 2113 raised the mill rate to shore up DPR's budget. Not one of our elected officials proposed the obvious fix: funding the watchdog from the general fund instead of the industry it watches.

When the players pay the ref, the game is rigged against the people.

The Revolving Door

Val Dolcini ran the California Department of Pesticide Regulation from 2019 to July 2021. One month after leaving, he became Syngenta's head of sustainability and government affairs for North America — a role in which he still shapes pesticide policy for the industry side. He didn't sign any Ladera Ranch close-out. But the pattern is real: the person who ran an agency funded almost entirely by fees on pesticide sales now represents one of the largest pesticide makers in the world — a company that pays into the very fund Dolcini used to oversee.

ChemChina, a Chinese state-owned enterprise, bought Syngenta in 2017 for $43 billion. In 2021, ChemChina merged with Sinochem to form Sinochem Holdings — answerable to China's state asset regulator. California's former top pesticide regulator now represents a company ultimately owned by the Chinese government, and one of the companies funding our pesticide regulating agencies.

Now On the Record

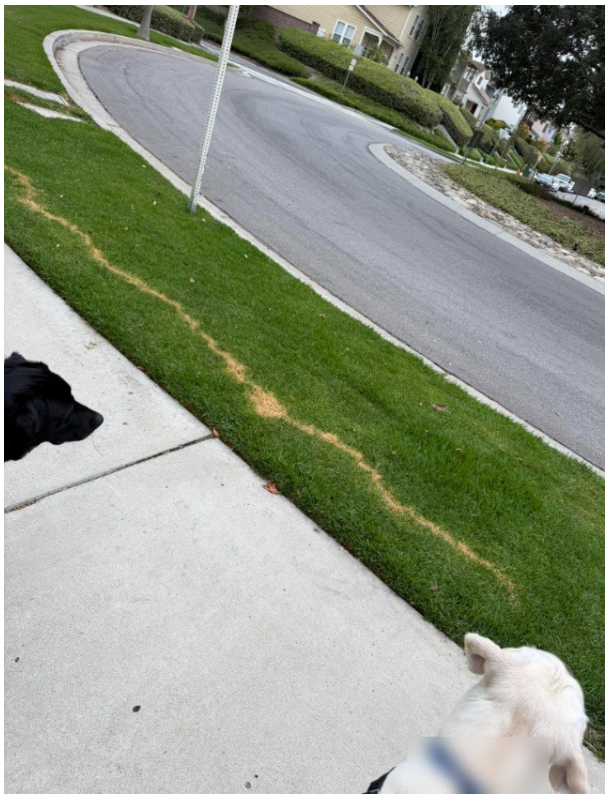
In August 2026, at DPR's first legislative oversight hearing in nearly a decade, pesticide-reform advocate Angel Garcia told lawmakers plainly: as long as DPR's budget depends on pesticide sales, California will stay behind on protecting people from the most dangerous chemicals.

Weeks later, a bill to phase out pesticides containing PFAS — “forever chemicals” that don't break down in the body or environment and are linked to cancer, immune suppression, hormone disruption, and fertility problems — was gutted after industry, including Syngenta, spent hundreds of thousands of dollars lobbying against it. This is no longer just a Ladera Ranch story. It's the subject of state testimony.

The Ladera Ranch Case

Seven pesticide complaints filed between 2019 and 2021 were analyzed for this story — including six filed independently in a single five-week span — all closed with a finding of “no violations,” with zero site visits and, in one batch, all six reports approved on the very same day, ten months later. A September 9, 2026 letter asked DPR for a written determination on whether the applicable notice, drift, and label rules were followed. It's still pending.

This is not a paperwork problem. It's what happens when the agencies responsible for protecting our children and our pets are funded by the very industry they're supposed to police. Seven complaints, zero site visits, one convenient finding, six years running — and still no answer. Orange County's Agricultural Commissioner and California's own Department of Pesticide Regulation have had every chance to look closely at what's being sprayed where our kids walk to school and our dogs play in the grass, and every time, they've chosen not to. That isn't oversight. It's abdication, dressed up as process. Residents did the work the regulators wouldn't: we documented it, filed it, and asked the right questions under the right statutes. Our communities deserve better than silence and a referral back to the office that already failed them.



The dogs already know where the line is. — Photo: a Ladera Ranch resident, June 2026

THE ASK: Name the regulations, say whether they were followed, and fund the watchdog independently of the industry it regulates.