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THE GREEN LEAF

Pesticide use seen as issue of 'environmental justice'

For Ashley Lukens, program director of the Hawai'i Center for Food Safety, the most frightening part of the debate over genetically engineered crops in the state is not so much whether genetically modified papayas are safe to eat. It's the amount of pesticide use associated with field test sites in Hawaii and their impact on human health and safety.

Lukens, 33, is the former co-owner of Baby aWearness in Manoa, a boutique

that sells reusable diapers and other products for eco-minded parents. She said she was not initially interested in wading into the GMO-labeling debate in Hawaii. She got into the business as a new mom but left to complete her doctorate in political science at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, where her research examined culturally appropriate strategies for food system transformation.

The issue hit home for her when she met a Kauai mom

who was debating whether to send her two daughters to a school in Waimea that had been evacuated three times due to pesticide drift.

"I started to think, this isn't an issue about labeling," she said. "This is an environmental justice issue."

She decided to join the cause for more transparency and regulation of genetically engineered crops in Hawaii when the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Food Safety recruited her to head its Hawaii office last year.

The center, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization, released its first report, "Pesticides in Paradise," in May, claiming Hawaii has become ground zero for experimentation with genetically engineered crops. With a footprint of about 25,000 acres in the isles, seed companies have taken over

many of the agricultural lands formerly farmed for sugar and pineapple. The number of field trials conducted here — 3,243 during the past 28 years — surpasses any other state in the nation.

The most frequently



COURTESY ASHLEY LUKENS

Ashley Lukens:

The former owner of a baby boutique heads the Hawaii office of the Center for Food Safety

tested trait for G.E. crop field tests in the past five years? Herbicide resistance.

"So that, to me, really clarified that in Hawaii the issue of genetic engineering is not the issue of whether it's safe to eat," she said. "The issue is whether these plants are safe to develop and grow."

For Lukens, one of the report's authors, what's even more disconcerting is that the spraying of these crops occurs more often in Hawaii, and closer to where people live, when compared with other states due to its year-round growing climate and limited land. That means residents here run a higher risk of exposure to pesticide drift, with children, pregnant

women and farmworkers at greatest risk, she said.

The Hawaii Crop Improvement Association, representing the seed companies, characterized the report as "misinformation" and said the industry has a good track record of compliance with pesticide regulations in the state.

Lukens said more regulation of these activities is needed. For starters, she would like to see Hawaii establish no-spray buffer zones around schools, a measure in effect in nine other states.

Read the report at www.centerforfoodsafety.org/hawaii and see a Q&A with Lukens at thegreenleaf.staradvertiserblogs.com.

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