Objective and Overview

This audit examined the management of pesticides in Western Australia. The focus was to determine whether there is a coordinated and effective approach to minimising the risk of inappropriate pesticide use in Western Australia.

Pesticides are commonly used in agriculture and the broader community to either kill or inhibit the growth of various plants, animals and diseases. They are therefore inherently dangerous and need managing to minimise short and long term risks to the environment and human health.

The Department of Health (DoH) licenses around 2,400 pest management technicians and registers about 800 pest management businesses employing the technicians. It also licenses around 240 retailers of highly toxic pesticides, while the Department of Agriculture and Food (DAFWA) issues permits to farmers and technicians who poison feral animals and to people spraying near sensitive crops. It also licenses aerial sprayers.

Key Findings

- Registration, licensing and training of the State’s 3,200 pest management businesses and technicians is well managed. These people make up the bulk of those who commercially use pesticides.

- Agencies are not checking whether applicants for the relatively few high-risk licences actually have the qualifications and experience they claim. These high-risk licences include those issued to the retailers of highly toxic pesticides and to aerial spraying pilots licensed by DAFWA.

- DAFWA issues permits for around 1,000 rural landowners to use highly toxic 1080 poison baits and strychnine. Permits for these dangerous poisons are well managed.

- National food monitoring shows less than one per cent of sampled foods exceed accepted pesticide residue levels. However, the State based program has found accepted residue levels
exceeded in up to 11 per cent of food samples in some years. DoH advised that the State results were worse because it samples produce more likely to be exposed to higher pesticide use. We found there was limited follow up or reporting of these results.

- Water quality monitoring shows that water quality meets agreed standards.
- Agency monitoring programs show only a handful of complaints on pesticides over the past few years. However, the Poisons Information Centre recorded over 700 pesticide incidents in 2014 with the bulk of these occurring in the home. The Centre advised that at least 18 had the potential for serious outcomes.
- DoH and DAFWA rarely carry out inspections and checks of licensed operators and permit holders. This increases the potential for inappropriate use of pesticides to occur and go undetected.
- WorkSafe’s workplace inspections show that some improvement is needed to ensure that businesses store and use pesticides safely.
- Agencies have an informal approach to sharing information. For example, information on incidents is not routinely reported to other agencies. This can lead to missed opportunities to manage risks.

**Recommendations**

The Department of Health should ensure:

- they obtain evidence of all statements of qualifications and experience for Schedule 7 pesticide retailers
- the results from the WA Food Monitoring Program are appropriately followed up and that the results are reported and used to identify risk.

All agencies should:

- formalise a process to ensure coordination of effort, information collection and sharing between agencies and work together to develop a risk-based approach to checking pesticide compliance.