



Pesticide Problems, Part I: Legislative History

Andrew Hockenberry, Bryan Endres, and Jonathan Coppess

Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics
University of Illinois

July 16, 2026

farmdoc daily (16): 125

Gardner Policy Series

Recommended citation format: Hockenberry, A., B. Endres, and J. Coppess. “Pesticide Problems, Part I: Legislative History.” *farmdoc daily* (16): 125, Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, July 16, 2026.

Permalink: <https://farmdocdaily.illinois.edu/2027/07/pesticide-problems-part-i-legislative-history.html>

In late June 2026, the Supreme Court handed down its decision in *Monsanto Co. v. Durnell* ([No. 24–1068](#)). The Court held that the “Uniformity” provision in the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA) expressly preempts label-based failure-to-warn claims (Slip Op. at 22). Typically, if a product’s manufacturer does not put a warning on a product’s label, and that product injures the user in its directed or ordinary usage, the injured user could bring a failure-to-warn claim against the manufacturer to compensate for their injury. Although the injured user’s compensation is retroactive, the availability of failure-to-warn claims is an important legal response to potentially harmful products entering the market. In this decision, however, the Court found that FIFRA’s call for uniformity plucks pesticides from that legal framework, ruling that pesticide law is designed to provide certainty to pesticide manufacturers, not as a response to injuries from potentially harmful products.

To be sure, this decision is consistent with FIFRA’s legislative history—i.e., pesticide law has always been designed primarily to protect the pesticide industry. The recent House debate on, and the amendment to, the unfinished Farm Bill (H.R. 7567) “demonstrated that revising FIFRA to protect the industry is not popular nor politically supported” (*farmdoc daily*, [April 30, 2026](#)). Despite what can be bad optics, the legislative history shows (and *Durnell* confirms) that a pesticide label provides a shield for the pesticide industry and allows the industry to redirect blame for harm caused by pesticides to the user: the farmer or applicator. In other words, under our “label is the law” structure, if someone is harmed by a pesticide, the manufacturer may escape responsibility or accountability by claiming that the harm was the fault of the person using or applying the pesticide, that whoever was using the pesticide must not have been using it according to the label.

This article kicks off a two-part series on pesticide law and policy and the implications of *Durnell*. Here in Part I, we investigate FIFRA’s legislative history starting with the Insecticide Act of 1910 and follow it all the way to 1972, when Congress revised FIFRA, creating the regulatory scheme we have today. Then, in Part II we introduce Roundup, the glyphosate-based pesticide at the heart of *Durnell*, and dive into the facts of that case and the implications of the Court’s decision. This series argues that if the purpose of pesticide policy or FIFRA is to protect the pesticide user and the public, we either need to fix it or come up

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with something else. Along the way, we will offer ideas as to how it could be fixed or what something else might look like.

Discussion

Before jumping into the legislative history, we should note that we use the term “pesticide” interchangeably with “herbicide” and “insecticide.” This usage is consistent with FIFRA’s definition of “pesticide” as, “any substance or mixture of substances intended for preventing, destroying, repelling, or mitigating any pest,” which includes “any insect, rodent, nematode, fungus, or weed.” (7 U.S.C. § 136(t), (u)). Without getting too into the weeds here in Part I, pesticides are “dangerous products, which by definition kill living organisms” (*Monsanto Co. v. Durnell*, Tr. of Oral Arg. at 77).

1. The Insecticide Act of 1910

When Congress passed its first pesticide law, the Insecticide Act of 1910 (P.L. 61-152), it was really playing catch-up with the states. That is, prior to this federal act, six states had enacted their own pesticide laws addressing the “purity” of the two most prolific pesticides at that time, Paris green and lead arsenate (Louisiana (1890), New York (1898), Oregon (1899), Texas (1899), California (1901), Washington (1901)) (Haywood, 1917). The purity—and the uniformity—of these pesticides was of the utmost importance in the early-Twentieth Century. Without uniform purity standards, pesticide adulteration was rampant. For some brands of pesticides, “the strength [was] so low that it [was] of no value.” On the other end, some manufacturers created pesticides that were so strong they would “seriously injure” the crops they were meant to protect (Hearing on H.R. 20989, March 8, 1910).

Prior to its passage, the Insecticide Act of 1910 garnered overwhelming support from stakeholders. “The manufacturing chemists are for it; the horticulturalists are for it; the growers are for it; [and] the entomologists who prescribe these things demand it” (Hearing on H.R. 20989, March 8, 1910). The manufacturers supported the legislation for two main reasons. The first was to protect the reputation of both individual products and the pesticide market generally; if one manufacturer sold a substandard product, all would suffer. And second, manufacturers wanted protection from a patchwork of varying state legislation that would make nationwide compliance “very expensive” (Statement of support by H. F. Baker, President of the Thomsen Chemical Company). Horticulturalists, growers, and the entomologists that worked with them supported the legislation to protect current and future agricultural production:

[I]f inferior chemicals for spraying are used the work is certain to be unsatisfactory, the user is apt to conclude that spraying under all circumstances is unprofitable, and hence he will neglect methods which would mean an increase of 25 to 100 per cent, or even more, in his output. (Statement of Support from the Ohio Agricultural Experiment Station, Feb. 14, 1910).

They too recognized the financial risk and impracticability of the current patchwork of state pesticide laws: “[The Insecticide Act’s] passage will obviate the necessity of many diverse state laws and the incident expense of maintaining laboratories for the enforcement of such legislation in each State” (Statement of Support from the New Hampshire Horticultural Society, Feb. 1, 1909).

It should be noted, however, that the goal of uniformity within the 1910 Act is tied only to pesticide *efficacy* (i.e., a uniform purity standard), not to *safety* for humans or other animals. During the House Committee Hearing on the bill, committee members briefly questioned chief proponent E. D. Sanderson about the effect pesticides may have on birds:

Figure 1. Transcript of House Committee Hearing on March 8, 1910. Conversation between Representative Adamson (D-GA), Mr. Sanderson (President of the National Association of Entomologists), and Representative Richardson (D-AL).

Mr. ADAMSON. I would like to ask you one question that may be of interest in considering this subject. I have heard and read of an enthusiastic naturalist who insisted that the birds would destroy every insect, and that the remedy for insect pests was to let the birds get at the insects. I want to know if these insecticides would not also kill the birds, and I want to ask you further if in your opinion there is true value enough in the operations of those birds under that theory to make any difference whether you kill them or not?

Mr. SANDERSON. Well, sir, I am not an authority on the birds, so that I would not want to speak on that end of it; but so far as the insecticides hurting the birds is concerned, I think there is no evidence to show that they would injure the birds, except in very rare cases. I think perhaps there have been instances where, for instance, if grasshoppers were poisoned by heavy doses of poison, the birds would be injured; but the instances have been so rare as to be negligible.

Mr. ADAMSON. I think the naturalists go to the extent of saying that nature provides just exactly enough insects for the birds and just exactly enough birds to eat the insects. [Laughter.]

Mr. SANDERSON. I am afraid the farmer does not see it that way.

Mr. RICHARDSON. Is it not true that in States where the game laws are thoroughly complied with, you find fewer insects than in States where the game laws are not enforced?

Mr. SANDERSON. I do not know about that.

Mr. RICHARDSON. Showing that the birds are the enemies of the insects?

Mr. SANDERSON. There is no doubt about that.

Mr. RICHARDSON. And it is the judgment of these men who are acquainted with these matters that each bird kills so many insects?

Mr. SANDERSON. I do not know about that. There is one other point that I should like to make about the low grade, or adulteration, of these insecticides. Where a man buys an insecticide and it is not effective, he at once condemns the whole business. **farmdocDAILY**

After Mr. Sanderson dismisses the idea of pesticides injuring birds and Representative Adamson (D-GA) lands his joke on naturalists, the focus of the hearing shifts back to efficacy. This 1910 exchange in Congress helps highlight the perspectives of those advocating for the law and those writing it, particularly how they distinguished between farmers and naturalists at the law's origins. Furthermore, we see how the policy prioritized farmers who used pesticides, considering them as being on the path of progress, over those that did not (or would not).

With widespread support from stakeholders, Congress passed the bill and President William H. Taft signed it into law on April 26, 1910. Congress put USDA in charge of carrying out the Act's provisions. Essentially, the Act aimed to protect purchasers and users of pesticides—mainly farmers—from receiving a weak, ineffective product (snake oil) or a product that would destroy vegetation the product was intended to protect. After the Insecticide Act of 1910 took effect on the following New Years Day 1911, Congress did not revisit its provisions for over three decades.

2. The (Original) Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act of 1947

In 1947, the advent of new “economic poisons” broke the 37-year interregnum since the Insecticide Act of 1910, and Congress enacted the original Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act ([P.L. 80-104](#); H.R. REP. No. 80-313 (1947)). The original version of FIFRA (or “1947 FIFRA”) altered and expanded pesticide laws in important ways but also kept much of the Insecticide Act of 1910 intact. First, it expanded the scope from insecticides and fungicides to all “economic poisons,” which the Act defined as “any substance or mixture of substances intended for preventing, destroying, repelling, or mitigating any insects, rodents, fungi, weeds,” mirroring the current “pesticide” definition in FIFRA (Sec. 2).

At a basic level, like the earlier Insecticide Act, 1947 FIFRA prioritized eliminating the sale of “adulterated or misbranded” pesticides, not environmental or human health. The new pesticide law, however, did

expand the application of “misbranded.” Under 1947 FIFRA, a pesticide would be considered “misbranded” if it—being “used as directed” or in common practice—is in fact “injurious to living man or other vertebrate animals . . . or to the person applying” the pesticide, and its label does not include a warning (P.L. 80-104, Sec. 2(u)(2)(d)). This new misbranded application marks the first instance of pesticide law recognizing the danger of pesticides to human health and the environment.

Relatedly, another major change with 1947 FIFRA was the establishment of a registration system. Congress required that all pesticides (or “economic poisons”) that were sold in the U.S. be registered with the USDA. At this time, legislators believed that updating pesticide law to require registration would “provide additional protections for the public.” Under the Insecticide Act of 1910, the USDA could obtain and inspect samples of pesticides, but, as the House committee reported, “frequently, serious damage is suffered by agricultural producers and other users of economic poisons before the [USDA] had any knowledge of the existence of such articles, or their being offered to the public.” Registration, the legislature surmised, would work to prevent the injury, “rather than having to resort solely to the imposition of sanctions for violations after damage or injury has been done.” Still, registration under FIFRA was only meant to “provide *additional* protections,” not be the sole protection. When “serious damage [was] suffered by agricultural producers and other users of economic poisons” and the “damage or injury has been done,” the person injured by that pesticide could bring a claim of negligence, trespass, or nuisance (Cong. Rec. June 16, 1947, S7008).

Similar to the Insecticide Act of 1910, under 1947 FIFRA, Congress charged USDA with carrying out the bulk of its provisions. It was up to the USDA “to determine economic poisons, and quantities of substances contained in economic poisons, which are highly toxic to man” (Sec. 6a(2)). Overall, legislators saw 1947 FIFRA as “bringing the legislation up to date in order to give the farming interests of America protection against the use of these dangerous insecticides that are now being brought on the market.” (Cong. Rec. May 12, 1947, H5050). They believed it would “protect[] those who use such [new] poisons, and also the public in general, by compelling those who handle them for sale and distribution to follow certain rules and regulations.” (Cong. Rec. June 16, 1947, S7007). Importantly, 1947 FIFRA “was designed to work in harmony with the uniform State insecticide, fungicide, and rodenticide act,” which, by 1947, many states had adopted (at 180, [Committee Print, 95th Cong. 2d. Sess. Federal Pesticide Act of 1978](#) (1979)).

3. Pesticide Law from 1947-1971: Blame Shifting

Although Congress did not consider applicator safety and scoffed at ecological injury when it created the Insecticide Act of 1910, the original 1947 FIFRA did acknowledge the danger of pesticides by requiring adequate warnings on the label. Congress believed that by enacting basic pesticide labeling laws it could protect both farmers, who use pesticides, and the general public. But in that same (very transformative) period, Americans had fought—and died—in two world wars, suffered through the decade-long Great Depression that overlapped with the devastating, about-a-decade-long Dust Bowl. Suffice it to say, the social fabric of America was changing. And a rift was growing both inside and outside of agriculture (Coppess, [2024](#)).

In 1945, conservationist Aldo Leopold boiled the inner rift down to the “two opposing philosophies of farm life,” which were “(1) the farm is a food factory and the criterion of its success is saleable parts; and (2) the farm is a place to live and the criterion for success is a harmonious balance between plants, animals, and people, between the domestic and the wild, between utility and beauty” (Leopold, 1949). Moreover, “the nature of farming” changed (Bosso, 1987 at 25). “Wartime needs prompted the relaxation of land conservation,” and the dominant farm management policy became “crops planted fencepost to fencepost.” (*Id.*). The philosophy of the farm as “a food factory” began to carry the day. At the same time, an outer rift was growing: between 1910 and 1960 farm population as a share of the total population in the United States dropped from 34.9% to 8.7% (USDA, ERS, [Nov. 22, 1963](#)).

In tandem with these societal changes, pesticide manufacturers (directly) and farm policies (indirectly) pushed for the increased use of pesticides (Meiners & Morriss, [May 1, 2001](#); Bosso, 1987 at 69). And as manufacturers developed more dangerous pesticides and the public grew more aware of those dangers, the structure of pesticide law allowed blame for any resulting injury or potential injury to be directed toward the pesticide user—farmers—and away from the pesticide manufacturer.

A. Farmers and Eaters

An early example arose in the context of food. Everyone eats, but farmers produce food, and were increasingly reliant on pesticides to do so. In 1950, after recognizing the importance of pesticides to food production, the Council on Foods and Nutrition of the American Medical Association stated that, “poisons cannot be used safely on food crops without the development of certain fundamental knowledge concerning the poisons.” (The Delaney Report, Food, H.R. Rep. No. 82-2356 at 12, June 30, 1952). Months later, the U.S. House of Representatives established the Select Committee To Investigate the Use of Chemicals in Foods and Cosmetics (H.R. Res 323, 81st Cong. June 20, 1950). In its third report, entitled “Food,” the Select Committee raised concern over the unchecked use of pesticides in food production. The report found that DDT was “being stored in the tissues of the general population.” Despite recognizing “the lack of reported deaths due to DDT,” the report warned that, at that time, there was not enough data to determine whether the storage of DDT in humans presented a danger. The report landed on the side of caution, taking the position of the Food and Nutrition Section of the American Public Health Association, who stated:

Mistakes in judgment about the health qualities of chemicals introduced in foods may adversely affect the health of great numbers of persons. Just as fire prevention is an important part of the control of damage by fire, so also the effective control of chemicals introduced in foods may serve to prevent mass poisoning of the population. It does not seem that the consideration of preventive measures in this field should demand impressive statistics from the death records in order to justify the undertaking.

To give a little bit of background, the law governing pesticides in food at that time was the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act of 1938 ([P.L. 75-717](#)). Under FDCA then, food was considered adulterated, and thus in violation of FDCA, “if it bears or contains any poisonous or deleterious substance which may render it injurious to health.” (Sec. 402(a)(1)). Pesticides, although potentially injurious to health, would not make a food “adulterated” if they were “required in the production thereof or cannot be avoided by good manufacturing practice.” (Sec. 406(a)). Only after holding a public hearing and then making a detailed finding regarding the specific need for and tolerance level of a pesticide, did FDCA authorize the FDA (meaning if it wanted to, it could) to establish regulations limiting the amount of “pesticidal residue” that could remain on food. In the 15 years following FDCA’s authorization, however, the FDA issued limiting regulations only once. This cumbersome, infrequently used provision combined with a growing dependence on pesticides that was out-pacing the knowledge of their side effects, and the reports from the House Select Committee, led Congress to amend the FDCA. The Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare reported that, “the primary purpose of the [amendment] is to assure greater protection of the public health by improving, simplifying, and speeding up the procedure under [FDCA] for regulating the amount of [pesticidal] residue which may remain on raw agricultural commodities.” (S. Rep. No. 83-1635 (1954)).

The amendments Congress passed in 1954 required the FDA to promulgate regulations that established tolerances for pesticides residues on raw agricultural products that were necessary for production but were “not generally recognized . . . as safe” before the pesticide could be registered under FIFRA. Additionally, the new amendments required FDA to promulgate regulations exempting pesticides from the requirement to have an established tolerance, when the pesticide was necessary for production and did not pose a danger to public health. ([P.L. 83-518](#)). In effect, the amendments meant that when a pesticide left a residue on the food product, the pesticide manufacturer had to show the FDA that the anticipated pesticide residue would not pose a threat to public health, before that pesticide could be registered under FIFRA, and thus, before it could be marketed ([CQ Almanac 1964](#)). But the procedure freshly baked into FDCA still required tweaking. So, Congress amended FDCA again in 1956 ([P.L. 84-905](#)). These amendments allowed “any interested person” to petition the FDA to promulgate a pesticide residue threshold, and enabled the limiting regulation to take effect 19 days after it was issued or sooner if, in the FDA’s view, it was an emergency situation. Congress revisited the FDCA again in 1958, expanding the call for the FDA to establish pesticide residue tolerances for processed foods (CRS Report RL31921). These amendments opened the door for broader public participation in pesticide policy discussions. Still, with 90% of the public disconnected from farm life, much of the blame within these policy discussions focuses on the pesticide user—the farmer.

B. Farms and the Environment

By 1958, the concern around pesticides arose in other groups: “The sometimes lethal effect of modern insecticides on wildlife is becoming a matter of increasing concern to conservationists.” (Lyle, 1958). In

August of 1958, Congress passed the Pesticide Research Act ([P.L. 85-582](#)), which gave \$280,000 annually to the Secretary of the Interior so they could “undertake continuing studies of the effects of insecticides, herbicides, fungicides, and other pesticides, upon fish and wildlife for the purpose of preventing losses of those invaluable natural resources.”

A few years later, in 1961, officials from the Departments of Agriculture, Interior, Defense, and Health, Education, and Welfare, joined together to create the Federal Pest Control Review Board. The Board was established to coordinate pesticide activities so that they were carried out effectively and safely to best serve the public interest ([CQ Almanac 1964](#)).

Then, in June of 1963, Senator Abraham Ribicoff (D-CT), invited biologist Rachel Carson to testify before a Senate Government Operations subcommittee regarding the use of pesticides. Her widely influential book, *Silent Spring*, landed on bookshelves across the country months earlier, and had been serialized in *The New Yorker* the summer before. The serialized edition caught the attention of President John F. Kennedy, who commissioned his Science Advisory Committee (PSAC) to study the effects of pesticides. *Silent Spring* sounded the alarm about the unchecked use of synthetic chemicals, and the Pesticide Report from PSAC echoed Ms. Carson’s concerns. Senator Ribicoff welcomed Ms. Carson to the hearing as “the lady who started all this,” given the lackluster legislative efforts years prior.

“The plight of the persons affected by these poisons is pitiful,” Ms. Carson relayed to the Senate Subcommittee on Reorganization and International Organizations. Earlier, she suggested that legal mechanisms be put in place “so that the citizen inconvenienced or damaged by the intrusion of *his neighbors’ sprays* may seek appropriate redress.” The trouble, as Ms. Carson testified, was that the law at that time did not adequately protect “the right of the citizen to be secure in his home from the intrusion of poisons *applied by other persons*” (88th Cong. 2d Sess. 216-17, (1963)) (emphasis added).

To be fair, in that same hearing Ms. Carson testified that pesticides “have produced benefits,” and clarified that she believed “chemicals do have a place.” Still, those nuances are difficult to tease out of her testimony. Meanwhile, the othering-language came across loud and clear. For instance, Nobel Prize winning-agronomist, Norman Borlaug, called *Silent Spring*, the “best-selling, half-science, half-fiction novel,” and blamed the book for creating a “vicious, hysterical propaganda campaign against the use of agricultural chemicals.” (Boffey, [1982](#)). Also, in 1971, the House Agriculture Committee submitted a report saying it:

is of course aware of criticism in certain circles to the effect that agriculture is some sort of major villain on the environmental pollution scene. There is a clear implication by some that if farmers would only return to the ways of the “good old days” many environmental problems would no longer exist.

What we see develop in this exchange (and throughout this period) is a conflation of the farmer’s interests with that of the pesticide manufacturer’s, where the farmer gets blamed for the harm caused by products produced and marketed to the farmer. Moreover, this conflation is built into FIFRA; The manufacturer escapes liability for harm so long as it is covered in the label and, thus, the sole responsibility for problems with pesticides is pushed down on the farmer and the applicator. At no point in this process does Congress clarify responsibility for the manufacturing of these products. Although Congress amended FIFRA following these hearings, it maintained that the label is the law, and it is up to the pesticide user to stick to the label.

4. The Federal Environmental Pesticide Control Act of 1972

It has been said that the mark of “a good compromise is when both parties are dissatisfied” (David, 2004). That saying seems to capture the sentiment of the House Committee on Agriculture, when reporting on the 1972 FIFRA amendments ([P.L. 92-516](#)). In that report legislators described the bill by emphasizing that it “is not a ‘farmer’s bill.’ It’s not a ‘manufacturer’s bill.’ Neither is it an ‘environmentalist’s bill.’ It is rather a mixture of each, a composite of all, and the manifestation of a sincere effort by the Committee on Agriculture to meet the need for reasoned progress.” (H.R. Rep. No. 92-511 (1971)).

Part 2 of this series will pick up here—with the 1972 amendments that created the pesticide regulatory scheme we have today. The evolution of pesticide law provides interesting vantage points on public policy (Bosso, 1987). From one of those vantage points, the idea that humans can “disrupt nature” enters the

conscience of the general public and the U.S. takes important steps to protect the environment and human health (Boffey, 1982). From another, agricultural chemicals and “the green revolution” allowed farmers to feed a growing population. And from another, it appears that farmers were once revered and protected as providers and stewards, but over time they began to be rejected as polluters and spoilers. All the while, industry gets a pass, let off the hook for what they produce and sell. This legislative history shows that, from the start, policymakers and the law were concerned about protecting the market and the manufacturer, not the farmer and certainly not the environment.

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