Testimony of Anne Katten of CRLA Foundation at
April 25, 2010 ESTM Committee Hearing on Finding Alternatives to the Use of Fumigants in Strawberry Production

Good afternoon Chairman Alejo and other Members of the Assembly. I am Anne Katten from the farmworker advocacy organization California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation. I am an industrial hygienist or work safety specialist by training and I served as the farmworker and community member on the recent DPR Strawberry Fumigant Alternatives Workgroup.

On the question of fumigant alternatives, for many years the focus has been on finding a single silver bullet replacement for methyl bromide and frankly this has impeded development and adoption of non-fumigant alternatives. As we outlined in the report, a systems approach is necessary to address a complex problem like this one. We need an approach that combines a variety of non-fumigant alternatives alongside longer range investment in the development of resistant disease resistant strawberry varieties and research to better understand soil microbiology. Non-fumigant alternatives which allow beneficial microbes to flourish will also reduce greenhouse gas emissions by helping to sequester carbon in the soil.

It is unfortunate that working group members who are on the cutting edge of improving and evaluating ASD, biofumigants, biopesticides and steam couldn't be here today to explain both the promise of these methods and further research needs of these methods used singly and in combinations. ASD in particular has been shown great promise in both small and medium scale trials for pathogen control and cost effectiveness in preliminary economic analyses.

There is an urgent need to transition away from fumigants because of both short-term and long-term health hazards to fumigant applicators, fieldworkers and others who live and work near fumigated fields. As use of methyl bromide has been reduced, use of the fumigant 1,3 D, a proposition 65 listed carcinogen has increased to the maximum allowed under the township cap in many strawberry growing areas. Use of chloropicrin, a potent eye and respiratory irritant which DPR toxicologists have concluded is also a carcinogen has risen even more dramatically, resulting in an alarming toll of illness episodes summarized on the table I have supplied to you. In the past 10 years over 700 people exposed in 22 separate chloropicrin drift incidents reported eye and respiratory symptoms, including some asthma symptoms. The actual toll is likely many times higher because farmworkers and other poor rural residents are reluctant to report suspected pesticide illness because they can't afford to visit the doctor or take time off of work. and ofcourse chronic health impacts can't yet be quantified.

Three of these incidents took place just last summer impacting 89 people, mostly fieldworkers. In 2010 chloropicrin drift impacted a crew of roofing workers in Ventura, school children and cafeteria workers in Santa Barbara county and a crew of fieldworkers in Monterey county who were sent to work inside a methyl bromide buffer zone and more heavily exposed when the harvesting machine ran over the fumigation tarp.

We appreciate that in recent years the Strawberry Commission has invested substantially in fumigant alternatives research and many individual farmers have been increasing use of alternatives and organic production. We also note that strawberry acreage has increased significantly as use of methyl bromide has been phased down. Strawberry growers clearly need affordable fumigant alternatives which effectively control diseases but at least in the short-term they may need to accept some reduction in yield because of the urgent need to reduce the health and environmental costs of fumigant exposure to workers and other rural residents.

You've heard from some witnesses today that the non-fumigant alternatives aren't yet ready for adoption. At the same time, the writing is on the wall that the future of fumigants as a viable pest control strategy is limited. This is all the more reason why it is imperative that the state immediately establish a program to support farmers and facilitate the transition to fumigant replacements that are safer, profitable and will ensure the resilience of California agriculture into the future. Delaying this process does not help farmers who will need new tools in their toolbox, or farmworkers and community members who live near fields.

Specifically, to speed transition away from the use of fumigants, the state must invest substantially in development and implementation of alternatives and infrastructure. We recommend that four competitive grant programs be established within DPR and/or CDFA that provide grants for (1) direct grower support, (2) on-farm field trials, (3) agricultural extension services for non-fumigant alternatives and (4) the development of disease resistant varietals for crops that use fumigants. California can and should be on the cutting edge of technological advancements in fumigant replacements. Not only can our growers serve as a model for farmers across the country and worldwide, but there is also great opportunity for California businesses to take advantage of this market niche.

Finally, given the science showing the public health dangers of fumigants, it is critical that the state commit to a fumigant phase out. It's been 25 years since the decision was made to phase out methyl bromide, but methyl bromide is still in use and we still don't have widespread adoption of non-fumigant replacements because use of other highly toxic fumigants has been allowed to skyrocket instead. To ensure that California is successful in transition away from fumigants, the state must set clear goals and deadlines – with enforceable timelines and benchmarks for phasing out the use of soil fumigants overall. We ask that this phase out be completed by 2020. It's ambitious, but it's possible. California agriculture is at a turning point. We have a critical choice to make: whether we are going to innovate and create more resilient farming practices, or whether we are going to fall behind and risk the viability of the state's agricultural economy. We have a major opportunity to usher California agriculture into the future: waiting any longer will only hurt California growers, the economy and communities in the long run.

In closing, we strongly urge that the state adopt a forward-thinking fumigant transition program, with support to ensure that replacements are market-ready and widely adopted, alongside a clear commitment to phase out fumigants by 2020.