

Looking ahead...

Ed Philips discusses new latest Pesticide initiatives with Jon Allbutt

Two days before the General Election on May 6, industry consultation closed on a raft of proposed EU regulations to become law next year.

Less trumpeted than the fateful date when Britain voted, May 4 nevertheless marked another stepping stone along the way to controlling what plant protection chemicals the sport and amenity sector can apply and how it manages them.

The new government has the task of overseeing the progress of the measures – uninvitingly dubbed Pesticides and the Environment – A Strategy for the Sustainable Use of Plant Protection Products and Strategy Action Plans.

Although pesticides particularly have continued to be withdrawn steadily over the last few years, June 14, 2011 marks the date when these regulations come into force across all EU member states.

“To keep things on track, we are expecting the next stage to be a public consultation period on the draft regulations to begin in autumn 2010,” says Jon Allbutt,

“But the actual timing will only be set when the new Minister takes up his or her post.”

As former Chairman of the Amenity Forum Jon helped spearhead consultation with the UK Government and the European Parliament over several years to the point where the Forum was the principal body representing the sector and putting across the wishes of end users, such as greenkeepers and sportsground contractors

Although now independent, he was the Forum’s representative at UK and EU levels in talks set up to allow the industry to provide feedback on the proposed changes.

“The Forum is now automatically included in consultations,” Jon adds.

“We’re beginning to have more input in discussions, which we hope will mean the government begins to gain a greater understanding of what we want as an industry.”

Despite the turmoil of a sector in transition as it prepares for the onset of new legislation, Jon insists that the changes will not affect the UK as significantly as other member states.

“It’ll be a question of making adaptations to the existing rules; the impact here will be much less. The sustainable use regulations particularly will have minimal implications.”

For some time, the Forum has promoted the idea of a self-policing system for the UK, which focuses on handling plant protection chemicals in a sustainable way. That modus operandi has given us a head start on most EU states,” Jon argues.

Essentially, much of the new body of legislation is merely laying in law practices and restrictions that are already in place.

It’s not all plain sailing, however, with changes in training set to see the most significant implications for the sector, he predicts.

“The impact on operators will be relatively

small as the UK already has very good regulations. It is changes to certification that will cut deep.”

“There are planned changes to Pa1Pa2, a certificate currently used for knapsack and boom sprayer applications. At present, it’s a certificate for life but due to the introduction and success of the NRoSO Scheme, that will alter,” Jon adds.

It is proposed that users will have to update certification either through professional development (CPD) schemes via their employers, or every three years be required to resit examinations to regain their certificate.

“It will be dependent on the size of the organisation as to which will have a better cost benefit,” he explains.

Large organisations will find it easier to update three yearly on the whole but if you’re a self-employed contractor and not a member of a larger organisation, the CPD scheme might be difficult as you will not know how long staff will stay, so costs could mount up. It does though highlight the importance of belonging to your professional organisation, BIGGA for example, as certification can often be funded through it.”

With further chemicals set to be withdrawn under the sustainable use regulations, Jon stressed the need for UK markets and more importantly government to help move forward a more sustainable approach to reducing pesticides use.

“A good greenkeeper will try everything he can to control weeds before he looks at using any pesticides. They are a last resort. The new EU regulations will require the new Government to undertake research and initiatives to ensure that the UK culture of sustainable use is continued,” he insists before warning:

“It needs to decide a course of action quickly. As yet, no research has been done by any UK Government. We have no history in this country of looking into green approaches to reducing pesticides.”

Under the regulations, the UK will have five years to demonstrate that it is conducting research into green alternatives.

“So far, all the good work the industry has done to maintain sustainability as been done through our own voluntary initiatives, which was born out of previous governments proposing a tax for those that use pesticides. Taxation is not a solution to the problem and it’s time some serious research was conducted,” says Jon..

Most of the research quoted and used by the UK amenity sector has been completed in central Europe, with Holland conducting the bulk of it.

“To date, DEFRA have only put up some £60,000 into researching alternatives,” he reveals.

Stepping aside sustainable use, the most immediate effects on the UK will be substances no longer permitted to be used.

It is illegal under current and future EU law to store or use any pesticide that has been withdrawn, so a programme of effective communication about what chemicals can and cannot be applied is essential. “Ignorance is no defence in the eyes of the law,” Jon states.

“Good professionals should have no reason to dispose of pesticides as they should only need to buy what they need, not to store any.

“Carbendazim is to be withdrawn this December and is an important and widely used product for worm control by greenkeepers. By now, alternatives should have already been looked at, and the product phased out ready for the deadline.”

Proposed changes to the maintenance of small and large machinery under the new regulations have caused some concern, he continues, with issues of safety potentially at odds with proposals.

Conflict between EU and the UK amenity sector is a new thing but the

Amendments to regulations governing equipment testing could set the EU and the UK amenity sector on a collision course, Allbutt fears. Under current law, large sprayers require an MOT while hand-held sprayers fall outside the code because of the “prohibitively high cost” of testing them. Regular maintenance is still required under law, however.

In contrast, the latest EU proposals will entirely exempt small sprayers from testing. “It’s always been too expensive to MOT small sprayers, and in some cases it’s often more cost effective to simply throw them away,” argues Jon. “We’re still debating what we believe the best approach for smaller sprayers will be, as their use is a major element for amenity.

“We favour a voluntary approach to testing but ultimately we believe there should be some scheme in place to ensure testing is undertaken,” he insists.

“Small sprayers tend not to be as well maintained as larger ones, so we believe it’s vital to have something in law that will mean people can’t just avoid doing it.”

Calibration is another issue that he believes the UK amenity sector in general doesn’t do well enough and has voiced his concern about its potential repercussions in law.

“Everyone admits to having learnt about calibration but they tend not to apply it after passing the tests. The important questions end users need to ask themselves is, how do I apply pesticides correctly and am I doing it at the legal rate?”

“Calibration is a highly technical process and pesticides application has to be an accurate method. Too much or too little and the effectiveness of the pesticide is put at risk. Calibration sheets can be sent out free either from me, from BIGGA or the GTC (Greenkeeper Training Committee), so there is no excuse for not doing it,” Jon cautions.