

HAVE YOU READ A PESTICIDE LABEL LATELY?

By Susan P. Whitney

All chemicals that are designed to control pests, from the insects in your fields to the germs in your bathroom, are "pesticides" according to the Federal Insecticide and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA). This law says that no container of pesticide may be sold unless it has an attached label that gives specific information about safety and use of the chemical. Before you read any further get a container of pesticide — any commonly used household pesticide will do — and check the label as you read this article.

FIFRA says *The Label is the Law*. That's right! You're holding a legal document in your hands. If you don't do what the label says, you may be subject to a fine. You should always read the label before you buy a product and then again before you use it and again before you dispose of the container.

Now let's see what the label tells us. If the chemical is a *Restricted Use Pesticide*, the label must say so. Only certified pesticide applicators may buy and apply restricted use pesticides, however, anyone may buy and use general use pesticides.

The label must list the *ingredients* and the *type* of pesticide — insecticide, herbicide, nematocide, etc. The *name and address* of the manufacturer must be on the front of the label with the *Environmental Protection Agency Registration Establishment Numbers*. The establishment number will tell you which facility made this particular batch of the chemical — important information to know in case you suspect that something is wrong with the product.

SIGNAL WORDS

The *signal words* are probably the most important words on any label. There are 3 kinds: *danger*, *warning*, *caution*. Which one is on your label? "Danger" means that this pesticide is highly toxic to you, but not necessarily highly toxic to the pest. "Warning" means it is less toxic, and "Caution" means it is mildly toxic to you. The signal word will determine what kind of *protective clothing* is required by the label. Does your label list any protective clothing? It may not, so check under the signal word. Does it say "Do not breathe vapors?" Then you may need a respirator. If the label says, "Do not get on skin," you should wear protective rubber gloves, a long sleeved shirt and long pants. What kind of protective clothing are you going to wear the next time that you use a pesticide?

Now let's read the *state of practical treatment*. Here you will find *first aid* advice. You can see why it is important to read the label before you buy and again before you use. It's too late to read the label after the chemical has splashed in your eyes! Remember to take the label with you if you have to go to the hospital. Your doctor needs to know what type of chemical you used and the treatment.

How will you store and dispose of the pesticide container? Check the *storage and disposal* statement on the label. It should say to rinse the container three times before disposing. This will reduce environmental contamination. Plan ahead when mixing any chemical so that you can use the solution from this rinsing.

Your label may also have *environmental hazard and chemical or physical hazard* statements. Does it say "do not apply to any body of water?" or "flammable?" Agricultural products will have a *reentry* statement that tells when you or your workers may return to a treated field. Be sure to read and follow the *directions for use* carefully. Here you will find the plants that may be treated, the pests that can be controlled and mixing directions.

Now you know how to read a pesticide label. Make a practice of it, because labels are constantly changing! If you have any questions, call your County Agricultural Extension Service. And remember — THE LABEL IS THE LAW. ■

from *FloridaAgriculture*, April 1, 1987

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