

Industry advocates fear possible MSMA ban

by Heather Wood

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Some in the industry are speaking out against the Environmental Protection Agency's intention to cancel the reregistration of an older herbicide, saying there would be no alternative for the removal of some weeds if that happens.

The EPA released a reregistration eligibility decision about organic arsenical herbicides, which includes the herbicide monosodium methanearsonate. There are about 90 end-use products that contain MSMA, according to the EPA. It's most commonly used on turf and cotton crops.

MSMA is used to combat dallisgrass and other members of the paspalum family, as well as to eradicate crabgrass. It's primarily used in the southern

United States.

The evaluation of the chemicals was mandated as part of the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act, which calls for all products with active ingredients registered before Nov. 1, 1984, to be studied. Thus MSMA, which originated in the 1960s, qualifies for the evaluation.

"This process, called reregistration, considers the human health and ecological effects of pesticides and results in actions to reduce risks that are of concern," says Ernesta Jones, an EPA spokeswoman.

The RED states MSMA can transform into an inorganic arsenical, which is more toxic to humans than organic arsenicals, and the amount of the inorganic arsenical found in Florida groundwater that was tested exceeds the level

the EPA finds acceptable. The EPA report also states more than 90 percent of Florida's groundwater is used for drinking water.

The EPA's process provides a 60-day public comment period before a final decision is made. The document was released Aug. 5, and all responses were being accepted until Oct. 10.

The industry responds

Some industry advocates say they find holes in the study and are hoping the EPA will reverse its decision. Tim Murphy, a turfgrass weed scientist at the University of Georgia, co-authored a letter to the EPA with seven other professors from the southeastern United States outlining the reasons they disagree with the EPA's assessment.

"Practically speaking, it's not clear to

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me there's the same level of detection occurring in Florida as is occurring in other places," Murphy says. "I'm assuming there's very sandy soil. I don't know if it's applicable to all soil types in the United States, but I'm not disputing they detected it. Florida has unique soils in many respects, but would that be applicable to Georgia, or Raleigh, N.C.? I don't know if it would be in those soils."

Jones responds: "Florida is described as an area of concern because of its very sandy soils and shallow water tables with golf courses particularly susceptible to leaching because they typically have well-drained soils and are heavily irrigated," she says, referencing the RED.

"Similar environments, within Florida and nationally, would be considered to be highly vulnerable," she adds. "These include areas with shallow water tables, low background (naturally existing) arsenic levels and well-drained soils to which arsenicals to not sorb strongly."

Michal Eldan, Ph.D., is chairperson of the MAA Research Task Force, a coalition of three MSMA producers. The task force is dedicated to the safe use of MSMA and disodium methanearsonate. Like Murphy and his colleagues, the MAA Research Task Force penned a letter disagreeing with the EPA's decision.

Eldan says the task force presented the EPA with results of modeling to demonstrate that MSMA's contribution of inorganic arsenicals was below what the EPA defined as the accepted level. The EPA then lowered the acceptable level, Eldan says.

"It's like a moving target," she says about the EPA's requirements.

The MAARTF had a consultant, Waterborne Environmental International, create a model in which a supposed MSMA was used at the highest frequency possible, on every square inch of a golf course with all the MSMA transforming to the more toxic inorganic arsenical. The model represented levels that are

never as high normally, Eldan says.

"If you get good results with the worst-case scenario, you don't have to worry, but if you have results that are unacceptable, you have to refine the model for more reasonable assumptions," she says.

With these worst-case scenario results, the model shows the levels of inorganic arsenicals contributed exceeded 10 parts per billion – the EPA's stated acceptable limit at the time, she says. The task force then presented to the EPA a new model that scaled down the hypothetical MSMA usage to an amount more likely to be used on a golf course.

Eldan says that when the task force presented this model to the EPA, the agency responded that the accepted contribution level was three parts per billion. This happened twice, she says, and each time task force consultants scaled the model down further to be more in line with the label's golf course usage instructions (for example, application as a spot treatment four times a year, and only on fairways). The



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RED cites the original model presented, which supposes MSMA is applied at the highest possible amount.

It got to the point where the EPA told the task force the accepted contribution level was 0.02 parts per billion, Eldan says, pointing out that's less than analytical methods are capable of distinguishing.

Finding a replacement

MSMA is the only herbicide that can successfully eradicate dallisgrass, Murphy says.

"Registration cancellation of the organic arsenical herbicides places an undue hardship on turfgrass managers attempting to control a weed that severely lowers the value of his/her commodity," reads the letter co-signed by Murphy.

Others in the industry are pointing to other effects they say the reversal of registration could cause.

"We know it's an economic issue for sod producers," says Stuart Cohen, president of Environmental & Turf Services, a consulting firm retained by the MAA Task Force.

"If they allow weeds to grow in the sod and they sell it, the buyer will find someone else to buy from in the future. Superintendents and green committees don't like to have broad areas of weeds on their tees and fairways."

The EPA report states many alternatives exist to control weeds in the absence of organic arsenicals. It names flauzifop and dithiopyr as chemicals that have postemergent control and dithiopyr or pendimethlin for preemergent control of crabgrass. It describes the primary method of weed control as maintenance of high quality turf.

"However, when chemical control of grass weeds is needed, typically, two or more alternative chemicals would be required to achieve weed control com-

parable to the organic arsenicals," the report states.

The RED concludes that because there are alternatives to using MSMA, the benefits of the compound don't outweigh the risks.

Although he doesn't agree with this outcome, Murphy is glad such oversight occurs.

"I'm glad we have agencies that are reviewing the pesticides that we use and the pharmaceutical drugs we take," he says. "They're charged with trying to make sure what's out there is only of low risk."

Murphy hopes end users of the herbicide will let the EPA hear their concerns no matter which side of the fence they're on.

The EPA's RED can be viewed at www.epa.gov/oppsrdd1/reregistration/methanearsonic_acid/. Comments can be mailed to the EPA in the address listed in the document, e-mailed or

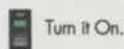


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Jones says the EPA will review any comments submitted and decide how to proceed from there. An official response will be released. If the ruling stands, registration would be canceled on all organic arsenicals studied. There would then be a period for any who disagree to request a hearing. This is the expected course of action.

"The EPA considered submitted human health and environmental fate data as well as available open literature in its reregistration eligibility decision," Jones says. "Based on available data, the EPA is unlikely to change its conclusions. If previously unsubmitted data were to become available, the EPA would evaluate these data and potentially revise its decision as appropriate."

To read the EPA's report on MSMA and other organic arsenicals, visit www.epa.gov/oppsrrd1/reregistration/methanearsonic_acid. GCN

Tweaking the Tour

Agronomy department adds two positions

by John Walsh

The PGA Tour is tweaking the structure of its agronomy department to strengthen it.

Heading the department is Cal Roth, vice president of agronomy, who took over for Jon Scott, who left the PGA Tour to work with Nicklaus Design as chief agronomist.

"We're fine tuning the operations of the agronomy department, which Jon left in great shape," Roth says. "My transition has been smooth thanks to Jon and the quality and experience of the existing staff."

After an evaluation, it was decided the agronomy department needed to add two positions: a PGA Tour agronomist,

which has been filled by Bland Cooper, who came from ValleyCrest Golf Course Maintenance, and a director of agronomy, which the Tour is in the process of filling.

"What that does is structure the department so we have a director of agronomy for the TPC clubs and one for competitions," says Roth, who's been with the PGA Tour for 23 years.

There are two divisions within the agronomy department: one for competitions and another for the TPC clubs. Regional director Collier Miller will take over as director of agronomy and golf course maintenance operations for the TPC clubs, filling the vacant spot created when Roth left it to fill Scott's position,

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Staying afloat

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"This time next year we'll know how good a destination golf course we'll be and if we're as good as the hype," he says.

Business is a little different for those courses that have been around for a number of years. In Texas, The Tribute, which opened in 2000, started to recover from the effects of Sept. 11 in 2003. It has experienced a steady increase in the number of rounds and green fees since 2003, according to general manager Jeff Kindred.

Kindred says he can't reveal the exact numbers, citing the policy of American Golf, which manages the facility. This year, the facility is on track to generate 40,000 rounds. In 2005, it generated less than that.

The Tribute is in the high end of the market, which includes six other courses in a 40-mile radius.

Kindred says being a stand-alone course isn't a hindrance for business.

"In a lot of ways, being a stand-alone course is a positive because the golfers that come here don't want houses lining the course," he says. "This gives us a unique feel. Golfers like the fact that they feel like they're out of town. Because we sit out on a peninsula, you have that destination feel, like you're getting away from the daily grind."

Residential homes are five miles away from the course, but because the ground is part of Army Corps of Engineers' land, homes won't be built on the course.

The Tribute draws golfers from Texas and out of the state. Most guests are local businessmen and about 30 percent of rounds are charity and corporate events. A lot of people

call wanting to try the facility, referencing the course's Golf Digest Top 100 ranking.

Business is also aided by the fact the clubhouse hosts weddings – more than 100 a year. And corporate meetings tie into its customer base.

The facility offers amenities a hotel can't, such as allowing those attending meetings to putt on the practice green or use the driving range during breaks. There also are eight guest suites that are part of the stay-and-play package offered by the facility. The suites are appointed with antique Scottish furniture.

Alone no more

For those stand-alone courses that have been struggling, owners have been looking at ways to make them more profitable, mainly adding real estate components as sources of revenue. Steele says owners are getting creative and selling parcels of land around stand-alone golf courses, building homes throughout the course.

"People are doing this to add revenue," he says. "I've even heard of re-routing some holes to include some houses."

In Catossa, Okla., the Cherokee Hills Golf Club, once called Indian Hills and Spunky Creek, was struggling because it had no real estate or municipality to underwrite it, Davis says. The Perry Maxwell design that was redesigned by Davis used to be a stand-alone course, but a Native American tribe bought it and built a casino and hotel on the property.

"We'll see stand-alones that will be redesigned or redeveloped so the golf course serves as an amenity to the primary revenue source," Davis says. GCN



A hotel and casino were added to Cherokee Hills Golf Club because it was struggling as a stand-alone course. Photo: Tripp Davis and Associates

news analysis

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and Collier's position will be filled by a TPC agronomist by the end of the year, according to Roth.

Within the structure, there are six agronomists reporting to the director position that has yet to be filled – and most likely will be filled by someone outside the PGA Tour – and two regional agronomists reporting to Collier. All 10 agronomists overlap and work together.

"What this will do is allow for the appropriate agronomic support for each tournament as well as the operational and agronomic support for PGA Tour golf course properties. This also frees up time for me to be at headquarters as needed," Roth says.

As the vice president of agronomy, Roth will work closely with the staff of each of the three tours the organization operates and the staff for golf course properties.

The new structure also frees up Roth to look at future sites for TPC facilities and their development. Currently, the PGA

Tour is developing a new golf course in Naples, Fla. – the TPC at Treviso Bay, which is scheduled to open late next year. There's another TPC course on the drawing board – a 36-hole resort property in San Antonio, although ground hasn't broken yet. There are also other sites for possible development of TPC clubs. In addition to continuing to directly support certain PGA Tour events, Roth also will be available to inspect future possible tournament sites.

Cooper, the newest PGA agronomist, says he wasn't looking to leave ValleyCrest, but an opportunity came about that he couldn't pass up because he always wanted to work with the PGA Tour. He started Sept. 5.

"I'm at an age when if I'm going to make a move, now is the time to do it," he says. "The only job I would have left ValleyCrest for is the PGA Tour. The guys at ValleyCrest are a class act. I made great friendships while at ValleyCrest. I feel bad for leaving. I wish the timing could have been a little better, but there's no one to blame but me. They'll find someone sharper and forget about

Bland Cooper. It was a tougher decision than you might think."

Cooper sees himself spending the rest of his career with the Tour.

"It's the insanity of tournament golf that's attractive to me," he says. "Tournament golf is almost like a drug. I always liked preparing a course for a tournament. It's the finality of a tournament – we have a deadline. It has to be right before the tournament. There's a satisfaction I get out of that."

Tournament preparation is one thing Cooper didn't experience at ValleyCrest. He says that's not necessarily bad, but it was a void he needed to fill.

As a director of agronomy with ValleyCrest, Cooper traveled 180 days a year. He will travel about the same amount with the Tour.

Cooper says he doesn't know exactly how many golf courses he'll visit throughout the year because the Tour is always adding and moving events, but each agronomist is involved with 12 to 16 events, so he'll visit at least that many courses. GCN



Roth



Cooper