

Why cut back on Pesticides?

MINING FOR MOLECULES:
PART THREE

If products are less toxic with lower use rates and superintendents use them responsibly, then what's all the fuss about?

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The calls for less pesticide use on golf courses have been loud and clear *outside* the industry. But those same calls have become increasingly loud and clear *inside* the industry, especially in light of the current “green” movement.

Why?

It's not as if golf course superintendents are using arsenic and DDT to control pests on turfgrass. This is 2009, not 1959, and superintendents use pesticides that are more environmentally friendly than their predecessors.

“These are not the same products that were being used in past years,” says Dave Ravel, Turf Market Lead for Syngenta Professional Products in Greensboro, N.C. “They're more targeted than they've ever been.”

“Most of the products we introduced 25 years ago wouldn't even be considered for release now,” says Tom Hoffman, vice president of commercial sales and product development for Kansas City-based PBI/Gordon. “Our standard of safety has risen over the years.”

When he began working in the industry about 30 years ago,
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Hoffman says there was a public outcry to make pesticides safer. "And in the last 30 years, we've done that," he adds.

Some of the proof is in some of the newer pesticides' active ingredients. Several companies have released pesticides with the "reduced risk" classification by the Environmental Protection Agency, which means they have a low-impact on human health, low toxicity to non-target organisms (birds, fish and plants), low potential for groundwater contamination and lower use rates, among other attributes. Other proof is the fact that superintendents use the products according to EPA label restrictions — in other words, responsibly.

Still, plenty of people in and outside the golf industry say courses would be better off with minimal or no pesticide use because pesticides are harmful to people and wildlife.

Such thinking frustrates people like Chuck Silcox, the global turf and ornamental product development manager for DuPont Professional Products, who had a hand in creating Acelapryn, the company's virtually non-toxic insecticide released last year.

"It was a significant advancement to bring this product to market," Silcox says. "But in some people's minds, it's the same as (banned synthetic pesticide) DDT. And that's a shame."

While chemical companies are creating products with substantially lower use rates, many people aren't taking notice, Silcox says.

Do they realize ... ?

Surprisingly, some of the people who want courses to use fewer pesticides are people who work in the golf industry. But do they realize what they're saying when they say "the golf industry needs to



David Frye of Valent U.S.A. says active ingredients have more favorable environmental profiles.

use less pesticide?" Do they realize many of today's pesticides — thanks to millions of dollars spent on research and development and a watchful EPA — are less toxic than they've ever been?

Do they realize what a golf course green might look like if a superintendent doesn't spray it to combat pythium blight on a hot and humid July day?

And if golf courses use fewer pesticides, what will become of the companies — many that offer financial support for the education efforts of the Golf Course

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Superintendents Association of America, its chapters and other organizations — that manufacture and market pesticides?

Knowing that they're making safer and environmentally friendly pesticides, several chemical company leaders admit they cringe when they hear people inside the golf industry say that pesticide use must be reduced.

"It bothers me that a lot of people who supposedly know golf have bought into that," says Owen Towne, president of Phoenix Environmental Care in Valdosta, Ga. "There seems to be this belief that pesticides are inherently bad. There's an extremely high margin of safety on most products sold today."

George Furrer, national marketing manager for the specialty products business unit at Raleigh, N.C.-based SipcamAdvan, says most people who say they want to ban pesticides have no concept what that could mean.

"There was a time when there were few pesticides available and the implications ranged from weed- and disease-infested golf courses to poor agricultural crop yields to athletic fields that were unsafe for children to play on," he says.

Chemical company representatives are also frustrated with the stereotype they're making money off the sale of poisons.

"There has long been the misconception that pesticide manufacturers and other members of the industry are only thinking of the bottom line and are too eager to 'poison the environment' in order to make a quick buck," says Pedro Perdona, director of research and regulatory affairs for Dayton, N.J.-based Cleary Chemical. "Nothing could be further from the truth. We're constantly looking for new minimal-risk products."

David Frye, marketing and alliance manager for Walnut Creek, Calif.-based Valent Professional Products, says chemical companies have developed and continue to develop products with low-use rates and active ingredients that last longer. "The active ingredients have more favorable environmental profiles



Golf course maintenance employees dress appropriately to mix pesticides. Is the day coming when workers don't have to wear any protective gear to mix and apply non-toxic pesticides?

than products of decades ago," Frye says, noting Valent's parent company, Japan's Sumitomo Chemical, is researching development of biological products.

Indianapolis-based Dow AgroSciences offers four pesticides registered under EPA's reduced-risk category, including LockUp and Sapphire specialty herbicides. Mark Urbanowski, the company's senior marketing specialist for turf, ornamental and technical products, says the four pesticides have lower use rates and offer superintendents opportunities to use products with lower active ingredient loads in the environment.

"Achieving a reduced-risk status is important when we bring new products to the market," Urbanowski adds.

Scott Welge, director of marketing of green professional products for Bayer Environmental Science in Research Triangle Park, N.C., says critics of pesticides should recognize the strides industry has made in the past five to 10 years. Welge says the people who say all pesticides pose danger haven't done their research.

Syngenta's Ravel stresses that the regulatory environment and process "to bring a product to market is more stringent than it has ever been."

Getting out the message

Chemical company personnel realize they must step up efforts to communicate that pesticides are not poisons. Toni Bucci, business manager for BASF Turf & Ornamentals in Research Triangle, N.C., says she fears the industry has not done a good enough job of educating the general public on the benefits of using pesticides.

"There is a general misperception that because something is a chemical, it is inherently bad," Bucci says. "We as an industry need to change that misperception."

Towne says anti-pesticide groups have turned the issue into an emotional one, instead of a science-based one.

"Unfortunately, the anti-pesticide groups have been effective in creating false perceptions about our products and how they are used," Towne says.

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Towne says people in the golf course industry need to spend more time “educating our own” about pesticides. “Something should be done to improve our overall knowledge,” he says. “It’s all of our responsibilities.”

What should be done?

Welge says chemical companies need to promote the positive aspects of pesticides in well-managed turf, such as carbon sequestration and cooling. “People need to realize the positive environmental attributes that well-managed turf provides versus unmanaged turf or poorly managed turf,” Welge says. “Pesticides play a role in that, and we have a great story to tell.

“If it’s regional or national, we have to make sure to tell our side of the story,” Welge continues. “We need to make the facts known and be ambassadors for the industry.”

Furrer couldn’t agree more.

“Let’s tell people about the vast improvements in pesticide active ingredients, formulations and carriers,” he says. “The computer I use today is much improved over the computer I had 20 years ago. It’s still a computer, but the comparison ends there. DDT was once a dangerous pesticide. Guess what? It’s gone. Why? Because it doesn’t meet the intense safety profile that is now required for any pesticide registration.”



George Furrer of SipcamAdvan says it’s time to tell people about pesticides’ vast improvements.

The facts could start with promoting science-based research, such as a recent study by the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, that reveals residues of two widely used insecticides picked up by golfers during a typical golf game do not pose a health risk.

Bucci says it’s vital for everyone in the industry to educate others about the rules that govern pesticides to ensure safety, such as the types of studies required for a pesticide to be registered by the EPA.

“We should also be telling our message in a way that resonates with the average person,” Bucci says. “We need to help develop an understanding of relative toxicity or safety with commonly used products, such as household products, pharmaceuticals and flea/tick treatments on the family pet. Within the industry, we need to talk about how pesticides support sustainability of a golf course.”

Russ Mitchell, product and marketing director for Raleigh, N.C.-based Quali-Pro, suggests superintendents,

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chemical company personnel and others take a distinct approach when explaining the role pesticides play in golf course management. Mitchell says people can better understand pesticides if their function is compared to aspirin. Humans take aspirin to overcome illness, and turfgrass is sprayed with fungi-

cide to overcome disease. In both cases, too much can be dangerous. But both are safe when used according to labels, Mitchell says.

The industry needs to be proactive in telling how it is environmentally responsible, versus having activist groups define it for the golf industry, Urbanowski says.



Mike Maravich of Arysta LifeScience says golf courses will always have insects and turf disease to deal with.



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“Let’s take a balanced approach to being ‘green,’ not a politically correct one which is to reduce all inputs — no fertilizer, no pesticides and no irrigation,” Urbanowski says.

Speaking of activists, Furrer says the radicals need to be separated from the rationals. “We tend to focus on addressing the radical or activist community when, in fact, all the information and science in the world will not change their opinions,” Furrer says. “Instead, we need to focus our efforts on educating rational people who just don’t know the real facts about pesticide safety, use and handling.”

As long as American golfers demand superb playing conditions (and there’s no evidence that is changing anytime soon), pesticide use will be deemed useful on courses. Mike Maravich, marketing and product manager for turf and ornamentals at Arysta LifeSciences in Cary, N.C., says golf courses will always have insects and turf diseases to deal with.

“It may be one’s intention to limit or reduce pesticide usage by rates or applications,” Maravich says. “But one may pay a price for doing that. As an example, if you reduce your applications of a fungicide from six times to three, you may pay a price for that. A golf course is a financial investment that needs to be protected.”

Adds Towne, “When the rubber meets the road and it’s 95 degrees with 80 percent humidity, bentgrass greens will get pythium. And superintendents will either have to treat the greens or they will have to spend an exponential factor of dollars to replace them.” ■