

HOT TOPICS

2,4-D re-registration progressing slowly

A special Task Force's six-year testing effort should wrap up by year's end. Data shows no evidence linking the herbicide with ill health.

by Ron Hall,
Senior Editor

WASHINGTON—The widely-used herbicide 2,4-dichlorophenoxyacetic acid (2,4-D) is going to be around for a while longer, possibly a long while longer.

Although nobody on the 2,4-D Task Force (certainly nobody with the U.S. EPA) came right out and said so at a recent, one-day 2,4-D status briefing here, that's the feeling that the 65 participants left with at afternoon's end.

The reason for this guarded optimism is based on what researchers have found regarding 2,4-D.

More accurately, it's based on what they *haven't* found: 2,4-D produces no significant adverse effects to human health or the environment, emphasized Task Force researchers.

By year's end, the Task Force should complete tests required for the molecule's re-registration, according to Larry E. Hammond, chairman of the Task Force's Technical Committee. Testing is about 85 percent complete.

"Are we serious about this?" asks Hammond rhetorically. "Yes, we are. The cost for data development is going to be in the range of \$22 million."

Task Force members are: Agro-Gro, DowElanco, Nufarm U.S.A. and Rhone-Poulenc. They all produce 2,4-D. They're supporting three forms of the compound: 2,4-D acid, 2,4-D dimethylamine salt (SMAS) and 2,4-D ethylhexyl ester (2EHE).

The EPA is wading through the data. It will probably take the Agency until 1997 or 1998 to issue a Re-registration Eligibility Decision (RED) on 2,4-D, says Hammond.

Only then will the EPA begin looking at 2,4-D, product by product. That's because it is usually used in combination—especially on turf—with fertilizer or other herbicides.

In one form or another, 2,4-D is used by farmers, turfgrass managers, and more than a dozen other user groups (including homeowners) to control broadleaf weeds. Actually, it's use on turfgrass is tiny compared to its use in crops such as wheat, corn and soybeans.



Larry Hammond, left, and William Mahlberg said EPA-mandated toxicological studies showed no problems with 2,4-D.

It's believed to be the most widely used herbicide in the world, and the third-most popular in the U.S. More than 45 million pounds of 2,4-D were applied in the United States last year alone. And its use is still growing, partly because of increased no-till (or low-till) farming, and partly because no weed resistance has as yet been recorded for 2,4-D. Because of this, and because of cost, it's commonly combined with other herbicides.

Dr. Philip Szmedra, an agricultural economist with the USDA, says losing 2,4-D in field crops and fruit and nuts would cost U.S. farmers about \$1.1 billion a year, and banning all phenoxy herbicides would cost about \$1.4 billion. (A study in Canada estimated the loss there at \$500 million.)

The losses reflect factors such as reduced yields and the cost of alternative weed controls. Economic losses from turf and some other so-called minor uses aren't yet calculated, Szmedra says.

Cancer studies still draw fire

WASHINGTON—Dr. Rebecca Johnson thinks peoples' memories generally aren't accurate enough to drive cancer studies.

She came to that conclusion after re-examining a 1993 National Cancer Institute (NCI) Iowa/Minnesota Case Control study that suggested a link (albeit a weak link) between farmers' exposure to 2,4-D and non-Hodgkins lymphoma (NHL).

Johnson says studies relying so strongly on the memories of victims lend themselves to miscalculations. The

data becomes even more suspect when the memories of victims' families are relied upon. Relatives, in fact, tended to report more exposure to 2,4-D, than the cancer victims themselves had in earlier surveys.

Also, the records of cooperatives where farmers bought their pesticides often did not match up with the farmers' or their proxies' recollections of what products had been purchased and used. There was agreement only 60 percent of the time in the use of 2,4-D.

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