

FIFTH AUSTRALIAN COTTON CONFERENCE
REGULATIONS AND THE FARMER

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Regulations over the use of pesticides in cotton production have been in existence ever since that industry emerged in Australia. Initially regulations were simple, however, as the industry has grown there has been a parallel growth in the environmental awareness within the general community and the arrival of environmental lobby groups. Part of government response to pressures brought about by such groups and the increased use of pesticides has been the upgrading of legislative controls over pesticide use.

Pesticide use regulations currently in force in Australia are among the more advanced systems in place throughout the world. In their current form they are both effective and workable from the point of view of the user and in terms of protection of the environment and public health.

BENEFITS OF ADHERING TO REGULATIONS

The pressures placed upon farmers and other pesticide users are enormous. They originate from a variety of sources and include:

- 1 A basic responsibility to ensure that pesticides are used in such a manner so as to ensure risks to the environment, human health and markets (as a result of residues) are minimised.
- 2 Extremist environmental groups attempting to bring about the banning of pesticides and certain application techniques such as aerial application.
- 3 Uninformed members of the public levelling unfounded allegations at pesticide users in relation to health issues and environmental matters.
- 4 Pressures from within the farming community from traditional farmers, who for various reasons oppose new farming techniques such as irrigation and the associated crops.
- 5 Increased economic pressures arising from high input farming practices.

Many farmers would consider that compliance with regulations should be included as a major pressure and this is probably correct up to a point. However, what farmers generally do not realise is that at this point in time regulations are one of their best defences against these pressures.

Under pesticide legislation - especially that which is in force in New South Wales, the registration process examines all aspects of individual pesticides including toxicology, human health aspects, environmental matters, efficacy, residues, resistance, application techniques and many more. The information on which the assessment for registration is based, is obtained from many years of research and development and produced at enormous expense. The cost is of the order of \$70 - 100 million per product. This information is reflected on product labels. Provided the farmer uses the product strictly in accordance with the label directions, the likelihood of environmental health or residue problems arising from its use are minimised. This provides the best defence against the previously mentioned pressures with the additional bonus of ensuring the continued availability and maximum life from these all important management tools.

THE PENALTIES FOR IGNORING REGULATIONS

It is not uncommon for farmers to assume that the penalty for ignoring pesticide regulations is a monetary fine. This is true up to a point - there are fines of up to \$40,000 for ignoring pesticide regulations in New South Wales. However fines are a very minor penalty in themselves when we consider what the real penalties may be. These include:

- 1 The provision of evidence to environmental groups to lobby governments for the tightening of regulations. This could mean that the use of critical pesticides become either impractical or too expensive to use.
- 2 You could be providing ammunition to anti-pesticide groups to have certain pesticides banned.
- 3 Court action following your disregard of regulations provides an opportunity to media to become involved and bring adverse publicity to the industry.
- 4 You could be facilitating insect resistance resulting in the possible loss of important pesticides, making pest management more difficult and costly.

- 5 Service industries such as agricultural aircraft could be forced to operate illegally as a result of your actions and possibly bring about a tightening of their regulations.

Whilst a single breach of regulations may seem insignificant to an individual farmer, two points should be kept in mind at all times:-

- (a) A single misuse of a pesticide can produce devastating "tell tale" effects on the environment. For example defoliant drift on trees. This readily attracts the attention of environmentalists, the public, media and regulatory authorities.
- (b) Each time an incident or breach of regulation comes to the attention of regulatory authorities an official record is made. These records accumulate. It is these records which are consulted by politicians when considering the tightening of regulations.

THE FUTURE AND THE ROLE OF SELF REGULATION

It is my experience that the public is tending more towards resolving pesticide issues by way of using politicians to tighten regulations, rather than indulge in rational debate. The danger here of course is the

increased risk of tighter regulation leading to uneconomic production of cotton. There are plenty of examples in overseas countries such as the United States and Europe where this has happened and pesticide applications must be made virtually under total supervision of regulatory authorities.

You must recognise that some pesticides are harmful to human health and the environment if misused. You must accept that the directions provided on pesticide labels must be followed precisely in order to ensure that misuse does not occur. Farmers must learn to make a total assessment of their total farm situation before applying a pesticide to ensure it can be done safely. Above all be prepared to accept if conditions are not correct, to withhold the application. Remember by comparison with other countries, the cotton industry is not excessively regulated. However, there is pressure from the community to change this.

Research is currently in progress into alternative pest control and pest management methods which hopefully will reduce our dependence on pesticides as we now know them. However, this cannot be achieved in the short term and in the interim it is essential that you preserve the pesticides which are available.

I believe the cotton industry can go a long way to ensuring the continued availability of pesticides and avoiding the threat of increased regulation. This I believe can be done through self regulation. There is a legal responsibility on all industry members to ensure that they comply with the regulations currently in existence. There is an industry responsibility on all members to ensure that they comply with regulations and take all reasonable steps to go above and beyond legislative requirements to ensure pesticides are used safely and efficiently without risk to human health and environment.

Remember the industry catchphrase - "SELF REGULATE OR SELF DESTRUCT" is also a very real threat.

