‘Cropduster’ says pesticides aren’t harmful

By DICK WRIGHT
 Advocate staff writer

Any day that he has the business and the right weather, Zoren O’Brien can send up eight airplanes to spray pesticides over rice, soybeans or wheat. They can also seed rice fields and spread fertilizer.

O’Brien’s Flying Service at Iowa, La., with headquarters on the Jeff Davis-Calcasieu parish line, is in the heart of southwest Louisiana rice country.

O’Brien expressed doubts about the vast majority of complaints from people who claim to have been harmed by pesticides. He said he has been handling agricultural pesticides for 25 years and hasn’t had any health problems because of it.

His business keeps planes in the air almost year round. Around Iowa this time of year his planes seed, fertilize and spray rice fields. Later they will work for soybean farmers. In fall and winter they work the wheat fields. O’Brien, below, owner of an aerial spraying service at Iowa, stands by one of his planes. Zoren says he’s been handling agricultural pesticides for 25 years and hasn’t had any health problems because of it.

“Agriculture is misunderstood,” he said. “I’ve got children. I don’t want to ruin the environment.”

The state has about 180 aerial applicators. About 100 of them are members of a statewide association headed by O’Brien.

A crop-spraying plane, above, levels out over a rice field on a routine job near Iowa, La. Around Iowa this time of year Zoren O’Brien’s planes seed, fertilize and spray rice fields. Later they will work for soybean farmers. In fall and winter they work the wheat fields. O’Brien, below, owner of an aerial spraying service at Iowa, stands by one of his planes. Zoren says he’s been handling agricultural pesticides for 25 years and hasn’t had any health problems because of it.
Aerial spraying is highly regulated, "the most regulated industry in the world," O'Brien said.

He said his business is regulated by the Federal Aviation Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

And now, O'Brien said, the state transportation department is talking about licensing all airstrips. O'Brien's planes use out-of-the-way grass strips for landing and reloading to save time and fuel instead of returning each time to home base at Iowa or a second location at Indian Village. A single plane may land and take off 50 to 60 times a day as it reloads, sprays and returns for refills, he said.

O'Brien employs eight full-time pilots, nine truck drivers, a shop foreman, mechanics and secretaries at the Iowa and Indian Village offices.

The business has never been in trouble with the state over violations of pesticide application laws, though O'Brien says it has made mistakes. One was poisoning a garden by a field. O'Brien said his firm paid for the damage.

Regulations cover nearly all aspects of handling pesticides and disposing of used containers. More regulations, intended to protect handlers, appear to be on the way.

O'Brien's premises at Iowa are clean. Grass and weeds grow green right up to the airstrip and to the edge of a large concrete slab where tanks are washed out. The slab is sloped toward a drain which catches the rinse water. Pesticide-contaminated water can be caught and reused rather than dumped. It is a closed system, O'Brien said.

"We're years head of others (other states) in chemical containment and control," he said. "Some states let it go down ditches."

Among the chemicals the planes spray are propanil, an herbicide for grass control in rice; 2,4-D, to kill weeds in rice; Furadan, for water weevil control in rice; and methyl parathion, an insecticide to control stink bugs in rice and insects in soybeans and wheat.

The farmer supplies the chemical. The flying service mixes, loads and applies it.

O'Brien said farmers stand on the ground and flag the plane, to guide it to the field and measure off the swath covered by a flyover. They probably get some of the spray on them, he said. But O'Brien says he has flagged and used pesticide for 25 years and nothing has harmed him. Pilots also get the chemical on them. He says they handle it, check sprayer nozzles and fly into the mist of the chemical but they don't get sick.

To people who claim some pesticides can cause birth defects, O'Brien replied he has two healthy children and his wife worked at the business when she was pregnant.

"I just wish there was some way to get environmentalists to come out and spend some time with us," O'Brien said.