As the sun rises over Vermilion Parish, a pilot takes off on his third crop-dusting mission of the day. Below, pilot Tom Watson lands to refill his turbo prop AgCat with fertilizer. The plane carries a one-ton load.

Accidental spraying complaints untrue, some maintain

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ABBEVILLE — The sight of a crop-duster flying low over a field, buzzing the crops and trailing mist, can bring the idea of wild-eyed, seat-of-the-pants pilots to mind for some.

To others, the sight of the settling smoke-like substance the planes drop brings fears of chemical contamination of the local flora.

Neither image of the crop-dusting industry, known in the business as aerial application, is accurate, said Mike Detraz Jr., owner-operator of Detraz Flying Service in Vermilion Parish for the last seven years.

Flying service owners are frequently the target of complaints about drift, or the accidental spraying or areas other than the target fields, particularly by people who assume every plane is carrying insect or weed poison, he said.

"When people see the airplanes, they think chemicals, they think poison, they're getting chest pains," Detraz said. "We're doing everything we can to get the public off our backs. They have a bigger misconception of crop-dusting than ever before."

For starters, not everything dropped from an aerial application company's plane is poison, he said.

Crop-dusters do put down herbicide and pesticide, but also take to the air to fertilize crops and plant rice for farmers or rye grass for cattle, Detraz said.

If the plane's payload is some form of chemical, poison or otherwise, the process is not as simple as pouring the juice into any old tank and letting it rip, nor can the pilots fly their routes any old way any time they feel the urge.

The Environmental Protection Agency regulates the mixes of chemicals, amounts applied per acre, types applied and spray width of applicators, Detraz said.

Pilots must maintain buffer zones between target and non-target areas and be ready to挥手 off the run if children are present or winds are too strong, he said.

The Louisiana Department of Agriculture keeps a sharp eye on crop-dusting companies to ensure they too the line in both chemical compliance and the quality and maintenance of the planes, their tanks and spraying mechanisms, said Jim Terry, owner-operator of the Lafayette-based Terry Flying Service for the past 10 years.

"The regulations have gotten much more stringent. When I first started, I rarely saw an inspector from the Department of Agriculture. Now I see them all the time," he said. "They regulate us pretty closely."

Accusations of flying services' payloads drifting off target are the most common complaint people bring to the Agriculture Department, and the most common way people try to turn a dollar they do not deserve, Detraz said.

"What people have done, and we've caught them red-handed, they grow a garden, see a plane go out and they'll spray their garden, kill it, and call the fire service," he said. "It has happened to me several times."

Time and again, the Department of Agriculture has compared the chemicals the plane dropped with the chemical that killed the garden and caught people who destroyed their own plants and claimed damages, Detraz said.

"I've heard of people poisoning fruit trees, oak trees," he said. "It's a real tough business we're in."

Complaints of drift have dropped sharply over the past decade, said Bobby Simoneaux, head of the Department of Agriculture's Pesticide Division.

"In the early '90s, it was becoming what we considered a major problem," he said.

The Department of Agriculture made new rules in 1992 requiring all aerial applicator pilots to go to a drift reduction school every year to learn to keep their drops as much in the target areas as possible and let them fall nowhere else.

The initial goal was to reduce drift complaints by 50 percent by 1994, he said.

Complaints dropped 67 percent the first year, and have been falling ever since, Simoneaux said.

The pesticide division has 89 field inspectors to cover the state and its estimated 400 to 450 crop dusting airplanes, he said.

"The No. 1 thing we deal with, with aerial applicators, is the drift," he said.