La. plant makes chemical that has apple industry in uproar

By BOB ANDERSON
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Uniroyal’s Geismar plant is the source of Alar, the chemical that has the apple industry in an uproar. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says it intends to remove the chemical from the market and is going through an 18-month process to determine whether the possible cancer-causing agent should be banned.

Meanwhile, many consumers, apple growers and Uniroyal officials are concerned.

“We had great dreams it would be a big chemical,” Hovey Simon, manager of the Geismar plant, said Tuesday. However, he said the fate of the Geismar plant doesn’t rest on this chemical, which makes apples redder and helps to prevent them from falling from the trees before they ripen. It brings “a good profit,” but its loss shouldn’t damage the future of the plant.

“It’s going to hurt (if the chemical is banned), but it’s not a life or death matter” to the Geismar operation, he said. “It’s not going to have a big negative impact on people working at the plant.”

Alar represents only about 3 or 4 percent of the production at the Geismar facility, Simon said. The material is made once a year, in response to market needs, and the process equipment is then cleaned and used in the production of other chemicals.

Whether future production will be curtailed has not yet been determined, according to Simon, who believes some of the material is sold on foreign markets.

“All the scientific facts aren’t in, but we have every reason to believe it is not a carcinogen,” the plant manager said. “It’s too bad people can’t wait for the facts.”

Alar is a trade name for daminozide, which has been tested by different cancer researchers on different species of animals with different results.

The material is not considered to be highly toxic, so being poisoned by the substance from eating apples is not considered an issue.

Many experts believe there is no safe level of exposure to a chemical that causes cancer, though the chances of contracting cancer from a carcinogen is related to the amount of exposure.

Uniroyal’s Geismar plant mainly makes rubber and chemicals for use in the rubber industry.