State rejects request from crop dusters to halt paraquat spraying

By PETER SHINKLE

The state Department of Agriculture and Forestry has rejected a crop-duster group's request that the herbicide paraquat be banned from use by crop dusters.

The Louisiana Aerial Applicators Association last month asked the department to bar all crop dusters from spraying the chemical, saying the chemical drifted off target easily, causing costly damage in rural areas.

Commissioner of Agriculture Bob Odom said Friday the department has decided not to remove paraquat from use because new regulations are expected to "solve the problem."

The regulations restrict the height from which pesticides may be sprayed, establish a buffer zone around inhabited structures, and set other standards aimed at reducing drift of pesticides away from fields targeted by crop dusters.

The rules were issued on a temporary basis and are set to expire in May. However, department officials have said they will make the rules permanent, perhaps with some modifications.

Odom predicted the new rules would "solve the problem" and reduce the number of complaints against paraquat, which is widely used to kill weeds in farm fields.

Farrel Keahey, president of the LAAA, said he accepted the commissioner's decision and understood his reasoning, but Keahey warned that the chemical poses a particular danger because of its tendency to drift.

Keahey said that unlike other pesticides, paraquat can drift away from a target moments after it has landed on a crop.

The effectiveness of the new rules in controlling paraquat will be determined by the number of complaints this year, he said. "Time will tell whether we're right or he's right," he said, referring to Odom.

The department's decision to permit use of the chemical was criticized by Melissa Thorme, fellow of the Tulane University Environmental Law Clinic, which represents several environmental groups on pesticide issues.

"Nobody knows better than aerial applicators what the drift problems are, and if the applicators are asking for this, I think the department should listen to them," she said.

In addition, Thorme has said the temporary regulations are not sufficiently protective of people's health and the environment. For instance, the rules require that crop dusters not spray within a 100-foot-wide buffer zone around inhabited dwellings. Thorme said the buffer zone should be 500 feet wide.

Odom said he made the decision not to ban the herbicide after meeting Wednesday with Keahey and representatives of ICI Americas, the chemical's manufacturer, and representatives of LSU, cotton producers and the Farm Bureau.

He said the group expressed unanimous support for continued aerial application of paraquat.

Lorna Bourg, an environmental specialist at the Southern Mutual Help Association in New Iberia, said she was "mystified" at the decision, since paraquat has been known to travel more than a half mile from targeted fields, and the buffer zone would not offer protection from such drift.

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Odom responded: "The people who were involved in the meeting were the ones who made the request. I didn't have to meet with
Citizens filed 330 complaints alleging misapplication of pesticides outside of homes and buildings in 1991, and 74 of those complaints, or 22.4 percent, involved paraquat, said Bobby Simoneaux, director of the department’s pesticide and environmental programs.

Odom predicted that the new regulations will curb the number of the complaints. “I think we’ll see it reduced by two-thirds,” he said.

The number of complaints in 1991 was significantly greater than the 192 complaints filed in 1990. Simoneaux said the increase was caused partly by heavy rains last year, which spurred the growth of weeds and insects and kept farmers from using mechanical methods to uproot weeds.

Odom said that with rains at a lower level this year, much less paraquat has been used by farmers.

Paraquat, sold under the trade name Gramoxone, is a highly toxic chemical that can kill a person by extended contact with skin. Swallowing a single teaspoon of paraquat also can kill, and the herbicide has become a popular suicide method in some countries.

The LAAA’s request, which Keahey revealed to an agriculture department panel last month, drew immediate praise from environmentalists.

Keahey said drift of the pesticide was damaging gardens and shrubs, causing “ill will” among citizens. In addition, crop-dusters must often settle claims against them by paying for damaged greenery.

Keahey said the chemical “was just leading up to more trouble than it was worth.”