

DO AGRICULTURAL CHEMICALS HAVE A FUTURE IN CALIFORNIA AGRICULTURE?

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My topic "Do Agricultural Chemicals Have a Place in California Agriculture?" should read "Does Agriculture Have a Place in California?". With assaults coming from all directions, agriculture in California is at risk. Ag is being taken to task on water issues, land management issues, public perception and of course pesticide issues. My intent over the next few minutes is to concentrate on pesticides in California ag; present a perspective of change, both from external forces and internal.

EXTERNAL FORCES

Environmental Groups

Environmental groups such as NRDC, Environmental Defense Fund, Sierra Club are just a few directly involved in changing the pesticide rules. Having very little success through the regulatory process, these groups decided it was time to bring the public into their battle to eliminate pesticides. Yes, I said eliminate, not control.

These people are not nuts or crazy, they are very well organized, well financed, and more importantly dedicated. It is very difficult to argue against clean water, safe food, abundant wildlife and a clean earth. These groups have concentrated on convincing the public that our water is contaminated, our food unsafe, our wildlife is disappearing and the earth is doomed.

Public Perception

By carefully manipulating the media, celebrities and elected officials, the environmentalists have changed public perception. Ag's biggest ally is now concerned. Farmers are putting chemicals on our crops so they can make money. Do they really care about the land, water or me? After "60 Minutes" and Alar, the swaying of public perception became painfully apparent. Ag has become fair game now. Can we regain the public's trust?

Legislative Pressures

When you combine environmentalist money with public perception, you get legislative pressures you cannot control. You get the Birth Defects Act, the Ground Water Contamination Prevention Act, the Clean Water Initiative, and for 1990 the Environmental Protection Act. You get the bureaucratic agencies developing their programs to show what a great job they are doing and the University system funnelling all their resources into methods socially acceptable for pest management.

INTERNAL FORCES

Because of the external pressures I have mentioned, the future of pesticides has been swayed by internal forces. These are the groups within agriculture, the buyers, packers, processors, grower groups, even chemical companies. All are now putting their special restrictions on the current system.

Additional pesticide residue testing by grocers, packers telling you what you can or cannot use. Chemical companies saying their products are safer. Does this mean other chemical companies' products are not safe? All this confusion, lack of trust in the system simply adds fuel to anti-pesticide movement. An army divided cannot win. Agriculture in California is divided.

Now, after providing this background information I must get back to the original question. Do agricultural chemicals have a future in California agriculture? I was trying to decide, particularly after looking at the agenda, should I cite scientific evidence in answering the question. But in the real world of public perception, I am going to use a non-scientific approach.

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I am firmly convinced that to maintain the current production levels, the quality and low cost, pesticides must continue to be a tool used in achieving those goals if we are willing to accept a reduction in quality, quantity and an increase in cost; there is no question pesticide use will decrease.

Low input, sustainable agriculture, and organic farming can be implemented tomorrow if we are willing to pay the initial cost increase. I am not so smart to say what would happen after years under these methods. Would a balance occur as some suggest, and production and quality go back to earlier levels? Is this something we should do all at once, or continue to slowly develop alternate methods. Biological agents, pest resistant plants, pheromones and safer pesticides are not only coming but are here, but limited. We are in transition. Will we be allowed to continue on a realistic pace, or will we let outside forces dictate instant change?

Agriculture must unify and tell the public its story. Agriculture is concerned. We want to continue to provide safe food while we develop better ways to accomplish this. Farmers are honest, ethical, and use pesticides only when necessary. Our system of strong regulation has worked, our standard of living has increased substantially. With the exception of lung cancer, cancer rates have decreased. Raley's testing of produce has only proved the system works. They have found no violations. We must continue to provide new tools for agriculture. Pest control advisers must be leaders in this transition, and growers must be willing to accept short-term problems in order to develop long-term solutions.

Finally, many of our difficulties have arisen from the misuse of pesticides. We have no room for intentional violations of pesticide use. We are all stewards of the land, air, and water, and to allow someone to violate this trust is criminal. Agriculture still has the opportunity to tell the public that we are the protectors of our land. It is a true story and one we must tell.