

Atrazine: Safe, Needed and Effective

By John Hart

If it were so inclined, the Environmental Protection Agency could highlight the herbicide atrazine as a farm chemical that is clearly safe and effective. For more than 50 years atrazine has been a primary crop protector for 60 percent of corn, 75 percent of sorghum and 90 percent of sugarcane produced in the United States.

However, America's farmers are concerned that the use of atrazine may be threatened by a new EPA review of its safety. Despite a proven safety record and demonstrated economic need, EPA in October launched a comprehensive evaluation of atrazine's effects on humans, which will culminate in a decision whether to revise the compound's risk assessment and impose new restrictions on its use.

Atrazine has a stellar safety record. In 2006, the EPA completed a 12-year review that included 6,000 studies and 80,000 public comments. When agreeing to re-register the product, EPA concluded that it provided no harm to people. Moreover, the World Health Organization has found no health concerns with atrazine.

The latest EPA review comes on the heels of claims by two environmental groups that atrazine found at excessive levels may have negative effects on the hormonal balance of frogs. Other unfounded claims charge that atrazine in groundwater causes cancer, birth defects and other maladies.

Extremist groups fail to acknowledge the EPA's own findings that atrazine has not proved to be carcinogenic in humans. They live in a fairy tale world where food can be produced without the judicious use of crop protection tools. And they claim atrazine can be replaced with other compounds. University of Minnesota research proves otherwise, as weed scientists have declared "there are no direct replacements for atrazine in pre-emergent weed control" registered in Minnesota.

Farmers like atrazine because a little goes a long way. As Manhattan, Ill., corn farmer John Kiefner puts it, “We can use half amounts of two different herbicides and get better weed control than you would with the full amount of just one.”

Like many farmers, Kiefner relies on no-till production practices, which retains carbon in the soil and minimizes erosion. Atrazine is vital in both no-till and conservation tillage. It is a must for keeping a broad spectrum of weeds from robbing nutrients from corn, sorghum and sugarcane crops.

Kiefner and other farmers worry that the cost of farming will go up if atrazine is banned. They simply can't do without atrazine. The EPA's own numbers back this up – losing atrazine would cost farmers \$28 per acre in lost yields and increased weed control costs. U.S. corn, sorghum, sugarcane and other growers would suffer losses of more than \$2 billion if atrazine were no longer available.

When he was campaigning for the White House in 2008, President Barack Obama wrote Pennsylvania Farm Bureau President Carl Shaffer regarding his thoughts about government agencies and science. He stated, “I will restore the basic principle that government decisions should be based on the best available, scientifically valid evidence and not on the ideological predispositions of agency officials or political appointees.”

With clear scientific evidence that atrazine is safe and effective, it's now time to see that promise put into practice. EPA must do the right thing and ensure that atrazine continues to be a crop protection tool available to America's farmers and ranchers.