

THE WESTERN PRODUCER

PMRA denies 'incompetence', explains 2,4-D review

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- The response was fast and furious when Health Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency announced in late March that 2,4-D is safe and doesn't cause cancer. | File photo

Official with Canada's regulatory agency explains the evaluation process that led to the chemical being deemed safe

The response was fast and furious when Health Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency announced in late March that 2,4-D is safe and doesn't cause cancer.

Many Canadians, at least those with little faith in Health Canada, went online to vent their fury.

A Western Producer story on Health Canada and its special review of 2,4-D, which was published earlier this month, generated dozens of comments. The following two posts summarize the thoughts and feelings of many PMRA detractors:

"The PMRA is clearly either incompetent, corrupt or both.... More and more research is showing it is indeed carcinogenic. The PMRA needs to be held accountable, and the individuals involved in this corruption need to be criminally charged."

"Clearly these folks (the PMRA) represent the industry and not the independent science nor the public's interest."

To give Health Canada an opportunity to respond to these criticisms, which arise whenever the government says pesticides are safe, the Producer spoke with Connie Moase, director in the PMRA's health evaluation directorate.

Moase shared information on the pesticide evaluation process and how the agency works with agri-chemical companies.

Western Producer: How do PMRA scientists decide which studies to consider and which to ignore when evaluating the safety of a pesticide?

Connie Moase: For post-market chemicals, or re-evaluations, we assess all the data we have on hand ... and we also look at any additional information that comes to us or that we can find in the scientific literature."

WP: How do you decide which studies are reliable?

CM: “There is quite a lot of information out there, especially those well known chemicals (like 2,4-D). We have to look across all of those publications ... and look (for) the consistency of the information.”

WP: How many studies do you consider?

CM: It could be hundreds. Absolutely. If you look at some of our reference list s... they are hundreds and hundreds of papers long.

WP: How do Canadians get information on what research the PMRA uses when it makes a decision?

CM: Everything is cited in our full document that’s put out for consultation.

The data gathering in the smart cabs of most modern equipment can be integrated with information from satellites, drones and other sources to help farmers increase efficiencies. | File Photo Critics say Health Canada is too reliant on industry-supplied safety data, and corporations control the process. Companies test pesticides and provide the results to the PMRA. How does that process work?

CM: For the pre-market aspect of pesticide registration, before anything goes on the market, there’s a very prescriptive set of data (required).... The onus is on the industry to supply the data that we require.... There’s a broad range of studies that are required. It translates into thousands and thousands of pages of data....

These studies may be performed by industry, but many of them are performed by independent, third party labs, contracted by industry.... In order to produce that data, there’s a very strict set of protocols that must be followed.... PMRA scientists as well as other regulators across the world are responsible for setting up those protocols ... that are consistent across various regulatory authorities, worldwide.

WP: How is corporate research on pesticides different from academic research?

CM: We get the raw data as well. We’re able to drill down to the individual animal in these toxicity tests, for example.... We cross-check across all that raw data to ensure there’s consistency in the information that we’re getting.... We can do our own

assessment of the raw data, as opposed to taking the summation of that data that would be in a published (academic) paper.”

WP: Why doesn't the PMRA contract an independent lab to conduct the tests instead of the corporation contracting a lab?

CM: It costs many, many millions of dollars to generate all of these studies. For one chemical, it can be anywhere from \$20 million and on up.... That's a big price tag.

WP: Corporate fees fund part of the budget for the PMRA. How does that work?

CM: It's pretty standard practice for regulatory programs to have a portion of their fees covered (by industry fees).... It's about 15 or 16 percent of our total budget.... These fees have to be paid regardless of the outcome of the review.

WP: How many PMRA scientists would be involved in a review of a product like 2,4-D?

CM: For each and every product, there's a lot of cross-checking and peer reviewing ... that goes on to ensure the robustness of the review.... It would involve all the directorates, on the environmental side, on the health side.... It would involve a team of upwards of five to 10 people.... It's not just one or two people. It's a whole team of individuals.

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