

# Big growth expected for biologicals | The Western Producer

*Sean Pratt*

Farmers are showing increased interest in input products made from naturally occurring chemicals or live organisms

Biologicals are slowly making inroads into the crop protection market.

"They're growing by double digits, but it's still a very small portion of the overall crop protection market," said Pierre Petelle, president of CropLife Canada.

"The latest number I heard was around four or five percent."

However, there is no doubt interest is growing in products made from naturally occurring chemicals or live organisms.

Petelle said the general consensus is that biologicals will continue to experience double digit percentage growth every year for the next several years compared to two to three percent for conventional pesticides.

All of the major agriculture chemical companies have made significant acquisitions in the biologicals field in recent years.

He said some manufacturers and retailers of biologicals "promise the moon," suggesting their products can replace conventional chemistries.

"The more rational consensus being developed is that these products have a role to play within a system that includes both conventional and biologicals," said Petelle.

For instance, as farmers get close to harvest they may want to switch to a biological so there is no chemical residue issue, or maybe during the production cycle a biological will work if suppression is sufficient rather than complete control.

The Biological Products Industry Alliance estimates global sales of biologicals amount to about US\$3 billion, up from about \$250 million at the start of the decade.

The vast majority of those sales were in the fruit and vegetable market. Row crops are a distant second.

A different CropLife, which is an online publication owned by Meister Media Worldwide covering the agriculture retail sector, conducted its first biological products market survey in December, 2017.

The publication surveyed 230 U.S. retailers, dealers, crop consultants, advisers and manufacturers or formulators of pesticides and related chemicals.

The survey found that biostimulants were the top biological seller by a wide margin, followed by biofertilizers and biopesticides.

Nearly three-quarters of respondents said their clients use biologicals to supplement conventional products compared to eight percent using them as standalone products.

About two-thirds of those surveyed planned on increasing the percentage of biologicals they sell.

Respondents said the top barrier to sales was that farmers have a lack of trust in product performance.

Petelle said the key to overcoming that barrier is to manage customer expectations.

Growers need to know that biologicals cannot replace conventional chemistries. An insecticide that controls 95 to 98 percent of pests can't be replaced by a biological that controls 50 to 60 percent of the population.

One thing that the chemical companies like about biologicals is the reduced regulatory burden and costs.

Petelle believes regulators in Canada and the United States have found the right level of oversight for the products.

It ranges from very little regulation for food-grade products such as garlic oil to far more substantial regulation for extracts of trees and plants.

"Just because it is something natural doesn't necessarily mean it is completely safe," said Petelle.

Examples of products that require extensive data packages are heavy metals used as fungicides and neem oil from trees used as insecticides.

It is a case-by-case approach to regulation rather than the blanket approach used for conventional chemicals.