No dicamba in '18, Arkansas weed expert urges

By Stephen Steed

MORRILTON -- A weed scientist said Thursday that he couldn't recommend that dicamba be allowed in the state next year after recent tests in at least four states show the herbicide's tendency to move off target and damage other crops and vegetation.

"This is a product that is broken," Jason Norsworthy, a weed scientist with the University of Arkansas System's Agriculture Division, told members of a task force on dicamba in their debut meeting.

"This is a product we can't put on plants during the summer months of 2017 and keep it there."

The task force was appointed to look at state regulations that could affect farmers' decisions this fall on what to plant next season. The group met atop Petit Jean Mountain at the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute of the University of Arkansas.

The task force's work the rest of this summer could play into whether dicamba -- seen by some farmers as their last remaining tool against weeds now resistant to other herbicides -- is available in Arkansas next growing season.

David Wildy of Manila, who told lawmakers last month that he likely will sustain $1 million in damage to his soybeans and cotton in Mississippi County, pushed for an April 15 cutoff date on the use of all dicamba herbicides.

No vote was taken, and the group will meet at least once more in the coming weeks.

Wildy pushed for quick action because farmers will be deciding in October what crops they'll plant next season. October also is when farmers can get discounts from seed dealers for making early decisions, he said.
Some farmers have planted Monsanto's dicamba-tolerant soybeans and cotton. Other farmers preferred to stay with other varieties of cotton and soybeans, but those varieties -- along with peanuts, fruit orchards, vegetable gardens, and ornamental shrubs and trees -- can be damaged by even small doses of the herbicide.

"I need the technology," Wildy said. "I want the technology. But if I can't keep it on target, it's not one I can use."

A survey by the University of Missouri recently put dicamba damage at 3.1 million acres of soybeans across 21 states, including 900,000 Arkansas acres, higher than in any other state. The survey also reported more than 2,200 complaints filed in those states, including about 900 in Arkansas, also more than in any other state.

The Arkansas damage came despite moves last winter by the state Plant Board, a division of the Arkansas Department of Agriculture, to set restrictions on the application of dicamba, including buffers, and require applicators be trained and certified.

The 19 members come from an array of agriculture interests: farmers themselves, seed dealers, seed growers and crop consultants -- as well as the trade group for herbicide manufacturers.

One task force member, Brad Koen of DeWitt, is an employee of BASF, which manufactures Engenia, a dicamba-based herbicide used by Arkansas farmers until a 120-day emergency ban on the sale and use of dicamba in the state took effect July 11.

Koen, who will represent the Arkansas Crop Protection Association on the task force, told Plant Board members on June 20 that a ban would be premature because complaints of dicamba damage "are still being investigated." Koen said Engenia was used on some 700,000 acres of Arkansas soybeans. (Arkansas farmers planted 3.3 million acres of soybeans this year; Monsanto has said its dicamba-tolerant technology is on 1.5 million acres of those, and on 18 million acres nationally).

BASF's Engenia, Monsanto's Xtendimax with VaporGrip and DuPont's FeXapan are three dicamba herbicides allowed this year by the federal Environmental Protection Agency for in-crop use, although Engenia is the only one of the three allowed in Arkansas this year by state regulators.

Another task force member, David Hundley, represents Ozark Mountain Poultry in Rogers. The company has a fast-growing poultry operation in Northeast Arkansas. "It's not just bad; it's toxic," Hundley, who manages grain production for Ozark Mountain Poultry, said of the dicamba herbicide at the June 20 Plant Board meeting.

The company has been a frequent and vocal opponent of Monsanto's dicamba-tolerant crops, saying they threaten the livelihoods of other farmers, limit those farmers' choices on what to plant and force others into planting the Monsanto crops. Ozark Mountain Poultry pays premium prices to farmers for soybeans that are not genetically modified organisms, as part of Ozark Mountain Poultry's business strategy of raising poultry that hasn't been raised on GMO feed. The company once bought 100 percent of its grain from Arkansas farmers; that preferred to stay with other varieties of cotton and soybeans, but those varieties -- along with peanuts, fruit orchards, vegetable gardens, and ornamental shrubs and trees -- can be damaged by even small doses of the herbicide.

"I can fix physical drift," he said. "I can't do anything about volatility." He said volatility was the biggest problem with the herbicide this year and that his own tests, and those by colleagues in Tennessee and Missouri, supported that belief.
Dan Westburg, a BASF representative, said data was still being gathered by the company but he didn’t believe volatility was a major factor. Still, he said, “I have never seen anything like this in my 27 years” in agriculture.

Engenia entered the Arkansas market after BASF allowed weed scientists with the UA System’s Agriculture Division to study the chemical for its effectiveness against weeds as well as its potential for off-target movement. After experiments in small test plots, scientists said the product could still drift but was less volatile than older formulations of dicamba. Monsanto kept all drift and volatility studies in-house and allowed Arkansas scientists -- and those in other states -- to study its new dicamba only for its performance as a weedkiller.

Any recommendations by the task force will go to the Plant Board. Any changes in current regulations would then have to be approved by the governor and lawmakers.

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