

Foresters call herbicide ban political move

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MIDLAND, Mich. — Forestry scientists and chemical industry representatives, smarting from the federal ban on the use of two herbicides, have been engaged in a four-day, around-the-clock evaluation of the report upon which the Environmental Protection Agency based its decision.

The consensus Sunday was that the EPA manipulated research data in "a glaring example of sacrificing science for political expediency," according to one member of the group, Michael Newton, a professor of forestry at Oregon State University.

"We don't understand it," said Gary Jones, spokesman for Dow Chemical Co., the principal manufacturer of 2,4,5-T, one of two herbicides banned by the EPA last week. "We thought we were getting along well with the EPA," he said. "We've been working very closely with them. This hit us like a brick."

Although earlier reports said there appeared to be no cause and effect relationship between spraying of 2,4,5-T and miscarriages in Alsea, Ore., the EPA last week suspended use of that herbicide and Silvex because "studies ... show a high miscarriage rate immediately following the spraying of 2,4,5-T in the forests around Alsea." Silvex also contains minute traces of a chemical contaminant, TCDD, one of 75 dioxins the EPA in the past has linked with birth defects and cancer.

Jones said that although Dow, with corporate headquarters in Midland, still hasn't officially been notified by the EPA of the suspension order, the company will resist the decision through the federal agency's appellate channels. An EPA spokesman said that notification was sent by registered mail to all chemical registrants last Thursday.

Officials of Dow called the meeting to work out a strategy to fight what it and other herbicide and forestry interests see as arbitrary action on the part of the EPA.

Participants at the meeting also included University of Michigan and Oregon State University forestry scientists, who have lent their expertise in the evaluation of the EPA's Alsea study.

The agency studied six years of hospital records in the Alsea area, where the agency assumed women had been exposed to herbicides. In Corvallis and in Malheur County, Corvallis was chosen as an urban "control" area and Malheur County was chosen as the rural "control" as locations where the herbicides were not used.

The agency claimed it found a definite relationship between "heavy herbicide spraying and miscarriages."

The spraying was heaviest during March, April and May, the EPA report states. In June, an increased number of miscarriages was reported.

Scientists and industry officials at the meeting believe the EPA's Alsea study makes a number of unsupported assumptions:

— EPA assumed without documentation that women in the urban control area of Corvallis were not exposed to 2,4,5-T or Silvex, although, according to records supplied to The Oregonian from three retail outlets in Corvallis, at least 500 gallons of an herbicide used for controlling lawn weeds in urban areas and containing Silvex were sold during the last year.

— The rural control area in Malheur County is in the middle of the Vale irrigation project on lower Malheur River. Although the EPA was told by the Bureau of Land Management that 2,4,5-T has not been used on BLM land since 1972, the rural control area is in an irrigation farming district where a variety of pesticides are used as common agricultural tools.

— EPA assumed that the June peak in miscarriages was actually a delayed effect of herbicide spraying. The EPA did not check for June peaks in other areas around the country. Hospitals in Midland and Miami show similar June peaks in miscarriages for which obstetricians have no explanation.

— The EPA failed to place significance in the fact that at the actual time of spraying, the rate of miscarriage was at its lowest. Barbara Blum, deputy director of the EPA, had said when the suspension was announced that the ban was issued because EPA studies showed a high incidence of miscarriage immediately following the spraying of 2,4,5-T.

— There is no data in the EPA report to support the notion that the women in the Alsea area and the two control areas were similar in age and other factors. Nor did the EPA allow for nutritional differences among the groups that might have led to miscarriages.