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Chemical Firm Chief Cites Book's Impact

'Silent Spring' Was Nemesis for DDT

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(Of The Capital Times Staff)

Rachel Carson's "The Silent Spring," published in 1963, was the first widely-read attack on the effects of pesticides on the environment. The pesticide industry heaped a torrent of abuse on its author, charging she was misinformed and inaccurate.

The impact of that book, however, was enormous. And a chemical industry executive admitted as much this week, as the pesticide industry wound up its defense of DDT at the state Natural Resources Department's hearings on a petition to ban further use of the pesticide in Wisconsin.

Samuel Rotrosen of Maplewood, N.J., president of Montrose Chemical Corp. of California, told the department Wednesday that DDT sales were at their peak the same year that Miss Carson's book came out. Some 108 million pounds of the pesticide were sold in 1962.

By 1967, DDT sales were down to 103 million pounds, said Rotrosen, whose company is the largest DDT manufacturer in the U. S. The "impact of" "The Silent Spring,'" he noted, was one reason for the decline.

Some other factors cited were the decline in cotton crop acreage (cotton farmers are the largest agricultural users of the pesticide); and the replacement of DDT on many food crops by more specific pesticides.

Annual gross sales of DDT, which is made by four other U. S. companies besides Rotrosen's, amount to about $19 to $20 million, he said, or about two per cent of total pesticide sales.

Rotrosen, who is also chairman of the National Agricultural Chemicals Association's "Industry Task Force for DDT," said that about two-thirds of the U. S. DDT production is exported for use in disease control abroad.

The chemical firm chief said there had been a "slowing down" in the introduction of new pesticides, because it takes three to six years and $3-to $6 million to develop, research and get government approval for a new product.

Rotrosen said his firm started making DDT during World War II at the request of the government, for use by the armed forces. Another chemical firm, Geigy, held the patent on DDT until 1960.

Rotrosen, citing "no ill effects" from DDT on employes in his plant, some of whom had been exposed to the pesticide for up to 19 years, said he thought he had convinced his children that "I'm not a devil, and that the product we make saves lives rather than harms them."

Another industry witness, Bailey B. Pepper, head of the entomology department at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., contended Tuesday that there were no effective substitutes for DDT for some crop pests, such as the cotton boll worm and the corn ear worm. An exterminating company executive, Taft Pierce of Lake Bluff, Ill., a vice president of Orkin, said the pesticide was also essential for mouse and bat control.

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The opponents of DDT, however, managed to get in another swipe at the pesticide this past week, with testimony by Dr. Robert Risebrough, a marine biologist at the University of California at Berkeley.

Risebrough, one of the first witnesses for petitioners of a ban when the hearings opened last winter, had been called as an adverse witness by industry, which has sought to suggest that DDT has been wrongly blamed for producing thin eggshells in some birds. (The pesticide is said to disrupt their calcium metabolism.)

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Under redirect Tuesday, however, Risebrough emphasized that "DDE (a breakdown product of DDT) appears to be the environmental pollutant most responsible for the thin eggshell phenomenon," despite the presence of a plasticizing compound, the "PCB," in some DDE-contaminated birds.

Computer analysis, he said, showed "no significant statiscal relationship" between PCB content in pelican eggs, and the thickness of their shells. As DDE content increased, however, "the shells became thinner" in both the pelican and another sea bird studied, the double-crested cormorant.

The hearings will reopen Monday at 1:30 p.m. in the Hill Farms State Office Building, with rebuttal witnesses for the petitioners. Testimony is expected to be completed in this long battle, which began last December, by the end of next week.

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