

Quality and Safe Food Demands Crop Protection Tools

Ever wonder why farmers complain about government regulations? A closer look at the issue surrounding EPA's review of crop protection tools for their potential effect on salmon helps answer that question.

A series of lawsuits considering the "potential" effect of crop protection tools on threatened or endangered salmon has been working its way through the regulatory process since 2002. Under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), EPA is required to work in concert with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Services to ensure that pesticide registrations and use do not jeopardize endangered species. This requirement, managed through federal courts and confused by failed interagency collaboration, yielded a pesticide registration process that undermines the integrity of the ESA, limits the reasonable and safe registration of needed pesticides, and is likely to collapse under the pressures of new litigation.

Despite continual concerns voiced by the agriculture community and state pesticide regulatory agencies, EPA moved forward with implementing the mitigation prescribed in the biological opinions. These actions include no-spray buffers of between 500-1000 feet near all conveyances of water, including ditches of any size and seasonal streams. In the State of Washington, These measures would prevent the use of affected pesticides on up to 75 percent of the state's existing farmland. Whatcom County farmland would see more than 90% of our farmland affected.

The high cost of farmland in Whatcom County necessitates the production of high value crops – berries, nurseries, potatoes, apples. We grow these crops with sophisticated, well tried and approved integrated pest management practices. Without these practices producing quality food that is desirable and safe for customers would not be possible. No farmer is going to poison the product he/she works so hard to make safe for their customers.

These new pressures come at a time when we are specifically concerned about finding effective tools to control the Spotted Wing Drosophila (SWD) which has rapidly emerged as a threat to Pacific Northwest berry crops. This exotic vinegar fly species recently began appearing at economically damaging levels in Oregon and Washington crops. We need all the management tools we currently have to address this threat.

The flaws in EPA's assumptions and the models examining the effects on salmon are numerous. The models assume we are using every legal pesticide on every acre, at the highest rate allowed, at the maximum number of applications, and as close to harvest as possible. This is a ridiculous assumption. EPA has also refused to use USDA survey data which documents actual pesticide use by farmers. Why? EPA assumptions on pesticides in water are much higher than actual WA State data. Why use assumptions rather than data? How did EPA choose 500-1000 feet for a buffer size? In a square 30 acre field surrounded by ditches, 500 foot buffers would leave about

½ acre in the center of the field to be farmed. Why are synthetic pesticides singled out?
Organic pesticides – made from natural compounds – can also cause harm if used too often and at toxic doses.

16th century Swiss chemist Paracelsus developed the most basic rule of toxicology: “The dose makes the poison.” Almost any substance can harm you, including water, caffeine, nicotine, gasoline, and yes, pesticides, if concentrated enough in your stomach or bloodstream. No substance will harm you if the level is low enough. The word pesticide has become a four letter word, even though pesticides are only chemicals that are used to kill pests, and when used in humans they are called medicine.

Like all local residents, farmers are concerned about the safety and well being of salmon and the health of fresh clean water. We are not opposed to reasonable and responsible regulations surrounding pesticide use. We already have stringent and appropriate rules governing pesticide applications. We have no problem being accountable to meet standards that are soundly based in science and public policy.

But while we embrace community accountability we will battle restrictions that devastate our ability to farm on the basis of “potential” effects. EPA’s restrictions on crop protection tools will meet our continued resistance. We expect support from others who examine this issue closely.