

Morning Sentinel

No consensus on pesticide rules

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WATERVILLE—Should it be up to neighbors to find out about nearby pesticide use, or the crop-growers doing the spraying?

That's among the most contentious issues under debate as farmers, agricultural organizations and state officials consider a proposal to create a new online Maine Aerial Pesticide Application Notification Registry.

During public hearings Friday morning, held at the Hampton Inn on Kennedy Memorial Drive and attended by about 40 people, a handful of speakers weighed in on the registry and other rules proposed by the Maine Board of Pesticides Control.

Board member Daniel J. Simonds, a forestry consultant in Rangeley, said he recognized the inherent "tension" with the registry and wanted to strike a balance between protecting people's privacy and offering pesticide-spraying information to them, while not placing too much of a burden on growers and sprayers.

Simonds said he wanted to find a "good faith" system that "passes the straight-face test," but "in my view, it's a legitimate point: The ethical responsibility of first outreach is to the applicator (of pesticide)."

The pesticide board had originally proposed that farmers make the initial contact with landowners within 1,000 feet of the fields to be sprayed to check whether neighbors wanted to be notified, but that responsibility has since shifted to individuals after strong opposition from the agriculture community.

Heather Spalding, associate director of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, or MOFGA, said her organization thinks the current proposal is "inadequate" because it should require that all pesticide sprayers take the initiative to contact people within a quarter-mile of a spraying area, rather than placing the onus on neighbors. MOFGA is concerned about pesticide "drift" to nearby properties, she said.

"We should require people setting the ball in motion to notify," Spalding said. "...You can only exercise your right to know if you know about it."

She noted the pesticide board's motto is "think first, spray last," but she suggested a modified version: "Think first, notification next, spray last."

David Bell, executive director of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine, said his group supports the registry idea but opposes its current form. Already, growers affiliated with his organization work to communicate regularly with neighbors and update their own notification lists, he said. What's most important, Bell said, is that the registry be simple and easy to use.

"The whole communication piece is a shared responsibility between neighbors," Bell said. "We don't believe rules, legislation, whatever, promotes effective communication."

Blueberry farmer Peter Aldridge, owner of the Hatch Knoll Farm in Jonesboro, said he felt the proposed language was too restrictive and should be more "dynamic," by allowing, for instance, registrants to be contacted by e-mail instead of telephone, if they preferred. He also suggested the Web page for the registry should be a simple, one-stop-shopping center where people can select what types of pesticides they want to be notified about.

Other ideas suggested at the hearing included putting up signs on land for people to call a phone number, or to create an automated telephone message sent to abutting neighbors.

Jason Allen, owner of Allen's Blueberry Freezer of Ellsworth, said small farms would easily be able to notify a handful of abutting neighbors about pesticide spraying, but larger farms with lots of property would have a near-impossible task of contacting thousands of neighbors, because it's both expensive and complex.

"It would be very burdensome and very difficult," Allen said.

Lauchlin Titus, a crop consultant for AgMatters in Vassalboro, said last year he worked with the five largest dairy farmers in the state and notified all neighbors within one mile of a manure storage facility. They achieved a 60 percent response rate by sending a mailed notification with a self-addressed stamped envelope, and the rest of the people were contacted going door-to-door.

The state pesticide board will accept written comments on the proposals until Feb. 6.