

PROGRESS IN TRAINING AGRICULTURAL CHEMICAL USERS IN AUSTRALIA

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Summary. It is essential that all users of agricultural chemicals are competent. At the 1987 Australian Weeds Conference, Kent and Pratley recommended the introduction of co-ordinated, industry based, national training programmes for all those who use, sell, or give advice on the use of farm chemicals. They also recommended changes to legislation to promote uniformity and remove confusion. Considerable progress has been made since 1987. The Agricultural and Veterinary Chemicals Association of Australia Ltd (AVCA) has introduced, through its Agsafe division, an industry, self-regulatory programme requiring the accreditation of storage premises plus the training and accreditation of staff. The National Farmers Federation, in conjunction with the Rural Training Council of Australia, has introduced a nationally co-ordinated training programme for the users of farm chemicals. Urban pest controllers are now required to be trained and licensed. Legislative changes have been introduced. Despite these advances many challenges continue to face our industry. Legislation controlling national registration of agricultural chemical products must be fully implemented. Training and accreditation continues to require co-ordination and rationalisation. Individuals and the Weeds Science Societies have a responsibility to support and participate in training and accreditation to ensure high levels of competency in the industry and to maintain the progress that has been made. Community and environmental pressures will force further progress unless we, as an industry, continue to take the initiative.

INTRODUCTION

Agricultural chemicals are an important component of economic and effective pest control and their continued use is essential. However, it is vital that these products are used accurately and safely to ensure effective and efficient control of pests, safety to operators and consumers, and safety to the environment.

To maximise the advantages of using agricultural chemicals while minimising potential problems we must ensure they are used correctly and only by well trained and competent applicators (3).

At the 1987 Australian Weeds Conference, Kent and Pratley recommended the introduction of co-ordinated industry based, national training programmes for all those who use, sell, or give advice on the use of farm chemicals (5). They also recommended changes to legislation to promote uniformity and remove confusion. Considerable progress has been made since 1987, although many challenges still face the industry.

RECENT INITIATIVES

It is essential that all involved with agricultural chemicals are competent. This is best achieved through education, training and accreditation instead of harsh legislation and licensing. This approach is supported by the 1990 Senate Select Committee inquiry into Agricultural and Veterinary Chemicals in Australia (1). In line with this approach, several initiatives have been introduced in Australia.

Farm chemical industry training and accreditation. In 1988, The Agricultural and Veterinary Chemicals Association of Australia Ltd. (AVCA) introduced a training and accreditation programme for all personnel concerned with the manufacture, distribution and sale of agricultural chemicals. This programme has been evolving and now AVCA has established an independent division (Agsafe) to implement and manage industry accreditation. This requires all personnel to undertake a comprehensive training programme and pass an examination to become personally accredited. As well, all premises handling and distributing products must attain personal accreditation by ensuring storage facilities comply with an industry standard incorporating all legal requirements. To date, over 7000 staff out of approximately 10,000 have gained personal accreditation while approximately half of the estimated 1200 eligible storage premises have gained premises accreditation (L. Day, pers. comm., 1993). A significant incentive to achieve accreditation comes in the form of a Trades Practices Commission Authorisation which requires industry groups not to conduct business with companies which do not meet accreditation standards.

A feature of the new Agsafe division is that individuals and organisations committed to high standards of safety and competence can become members of Agsafe.

As part of its on-going desire to continually enhance competency standards within the industry, Agsafe is in the process of introducing advanced training modules for those already accredited. These have been developed after identifying industry competencies and job profiles, and conducting a needs analysis through a comprehensive industry survey and consultation process. This stage II training has been facilitated by a substantial government grant and is being directed by a task force of industry representatives and educators. Training modules will be written in competency based training format to comply with national accreditation requirements and will be suitable for many industry sectors to include in training programmes.

End user training. In 1991, the National Farmers Federation and the Rural Training Council Australia, moved to introduce a National Farm Chemical User Training Program (NFCUTP) to ensure all users of agricultural chemicals are competent. Although mainly directed at producers, this programme is suitable for all users of these products and experience has shown an enthusiastic response from local government bodies, nursery operators, and government organisations. The NFCUTP is based on core competencies established by a National Management Committee. In each state courses have been developed and have been implemented to comply with the national competencies. The result has been a duplication of effort and resources with 6 different courses ranging from 8 to 16 hours duration. There is also duplication of administration and management activities. Despite these inefficiencies, the programme has been well received with nearly 10,000 participants successfully gaining their certificate.

This programme is the most significant training initiative ever to be introduced in Australia and deserves our full support. It is highly recommended to all users of agricultural chemicals (4).

Other training initiatives. Significant training programs which have been introduced in recent years for specific industry sectors include:

- A Grain Protection Short Course developed by Charles Sturt University for the grain handling industry.
- State based training programmes and licensing requirements for urban pest control officers.

Weed extension, training and the community

- A training programme in Victoria for urban herbicide users (2).
- Attention is being given to the training needs of those in positions like garden shops or specialist areas who do not see themselves fitting the mould of either the Agsafe accreditation programme or the Farm Chemical User Programme.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

All who are involved in the rural industries need to be aware of current trends and work towards meeting future challenges which will effect us all and require our attention. These include:

1. Implementation of the Agsafe stage II accreditation modules which will require close co-operation between educators and industry.
2. The National Farm Chemical User Training Program is rapidly gaining in significance. A major challenge will be to achieve co-ordination of state programmes to achieve a truly national course. Furthermore the logistics of providing a voluntary training programme to an estimated 500,000 potential participants around Australia is daunting.
3. All who are currently involved in the industry, including researchers and advisers, should demonstrate their support and commitment to industry training and accreditation by participating in these programmes and becoming accredited themselves. It is possible that in the future all will be forced to do so. Such provisions are being incorporated into legislation covering occupational health and safety and agricultural chemical use.
4. Organisations such as the Weed Science Societies have a responsibility to actively support and promote industry training programmes both in Australia and in neighbouring countries in the Pacific, South East Asia and beyond. The Societies must also lobby universities and colleges to ensure that students in their courses achieve recognised industry competencies so that on graduation they are well qualified to enter the industry.
5. While training programmes should be encouraged, their introduction must be rational and co-ordinated. We need to be wary of uncontrolled proliferation and duplication.
6. Changes to legislation are still required to ensure national and international conformity of regulations governing the transport, storage and use of agricultural chemicals. The national registration scheme for agricultural and veterinary chemicals must be ratified by our politicians so that it can be fully implemented. Again, industry organisations have a responsibility to promote this as well as contribute to the debates on product labelling and container management.

CONCLUSION

In recent years much progress has been made to ensure agricultural chemicals are used safely and accurately although many challenges still face us. As individuals and as an industry organisation we have a responsibility to use our influence and our talents at every opportunity to promote and encourage training programmes aimed at improving competency and professionalism. The full support of all is essential to maintain the progress we have made in the past six years and to meet the challenges ahead. Community and environmental pressures will force further progress unless we, as an industry, continue to take the initiative, be pro-active and provide leadership.

REFERENCES

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