

Farmers...and Gardeners...Need to Be Careful With Herbicides This Spring

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For the Evansville Courier and Press, March 20, 2016

Last week, a columnist for the Evansville Courier and Press lambasted local “crop producers” (he refused to call them farmers) because of their spring herbicide usage. He did have some valid points, but I’d like to clear up some of his mistaken comments.

First of all: Everyone who applies any pesticide, whether it’s a farmer treating 5000 acres, or a homeowner applying ant killer in the kitchen, must follow all label directions. This is a federal law. And if the label states to not apply the product during excessive wind, or not to use the product indoors, then the applicator is in violation of the law if they disregard these directions. To see what these rules are, check out this website: http://www.oisc.purdue.edu/oisc_rules_regs_laws.html#pestlaws.

The Office of the Indiana State Chemist, headquartered in West Lafayette, takes complaints about pesticide misapplication seriously. While the columnist was complaining about Kentucky farmers, I am pretty sure that the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, which oversees pesticide usage in that state, also takes these complaints seriously. While he mentions complaining to his legislators, he didn’t mention whether he actually called the pesticide complaint hotline. In Kentucky, that number would be (866) 289-0001; in Indiana, (800) 893-6637.

If you do have a complaint, be prepared to have some evidence and information to help the investigators. Print out the weather report from the day of the application (to prove windy conditions, etc.). Collect samples of plants that may have been hit with the spray, and stick them in plastic bags in your freezer (it may be possible to analyze the samples for residue). Don’t wait for the plants to die; by that time, the chemical may have broken down and disappeared.

Take photos of the sprayer in action, especially if you can show clouds of drift. Avoid doing so if that means becoming exposed to the chemical. If your plants do develop symptoms of damage, take photos and samples of those as well. Then, immediately call the complaint numbers listed above.

Bear in mind a couple of things, though. The farmer or the commercial applicator is trying to do the best they can to keep the chemical on the farm, and not in your yard. However, even the most conscientious applicator can be the victim of a stray puff of breeze at the wrong time. And while it is not a legal excuse, when a farmer has been kept out of his fields for several months because of constant rain, the temptation to get

out and apply needed chemicals on the first dry day can sometimes overcome their better judgement.

You can avoid many problems by communicating with the farmer or the spray company before spray season begins. A simple request to be notified a day or two before anticipated treatments will allow you to close windows, get the laundry and yard toys put away, and maybe cover sensitive plants with a sheet of plastic. Be aware that if the weather changes, so too will the spraying schedule, so please be flexible.

For more information on safe pesticide usage and living next to a farmer, please contact me at the Purdue Extension office, at (812) 435-5287.