

SPRAY DRIFT STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM

James W. Gray
WESTERN CROP PROTECTION ASSOCIATION
COALITION FOR URBAN/RURAL ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you on spray drift mitigation and application stewardship. You may think this presentation redundant, and perhaps it is. But the cold facts demonstrate that drift still happens. And our industry still accepts that. While a bit of drift from one corn field to another might be okay, our industry is experiencing much more than that.

Just yesterday I listened to a very good PCA share a story on driving a county road next to almond orchard and watching an applicator flying on zinc. The wind was wrong, and a line of cars found their windshields covered with spray. The story took the normal turn of cars pulling over and people getting out and expressing alarm over having been poisoned. It was fortunate that this PCA could identify what was being applied, and share that information, which calmed a lot of people down. Consider the outcome if no one had helped to calm them...imagine the news story that evening.

Indeed, we don't even need to imagine such repercussions. In September of 1996, a drift incident in Kern County California resulted in national media coverage, complete with eye-witness accounts of vomiting blood.

We in the Sacramento River Valley have suffered through an experience of a new crop (cotton) being introduced into an existing cropping system of rice. Last year at this conference, I expressed concern over the off-target damage being alleged, and voiced an industry pledge to do everything we could to properly steward the phenoxy herbicide applications to rice. We worked closely with the Rice Industry Association, growers, UC Farm Advisors and researchers, the manufacturers and distributors, and the CA Ag Aircraft Association to assure proper applications were made. The industry felt comfortable that this effort was being made and would continue to supply phenoxy herbicides for use on rice. Comfortable right up to the time when the lawsuits and claims far outweighed the potential profit and the customer goodwill.

These stories help demonstrate a clear fact of doing business out there today. We have encroachment. Encroachment by urban dwellers seeking a nice grove of trees and the joy that rural living promises. Encroachment by crops and new compounds, that exhibit little tolerance for, "a bit of drift".

As a member of the Coalition for Drift Minimization, I participate in discussions with a large group of crop protection companies, ag application industry folks, and EPA and state officials. The first meetings were held so that we could be prepared to deal with the release of the Spray Drift Task Force findings. These findings basically support most of the existing knowledge and research conducted on drift. The findings clearly confirm that droplet size is the most important factor relating to drift minimization. Logically, the results also confirm that drift only occurs downwind. Copies of these results are available, and will be submitted to the California Weed Science Society.

The Coalition for Drift Minimization has evolved into something much more. A presentation made by a Midwest Insurance Company showed that most drift complaints were "handled" by the insurance company. Indeed, most drift complaints never made it to the state lead agency (DPR in the case of California). This led to a US-wide survey of all lead agencies on drift incidents. The results are startling...more than ninety percent of drift complaints are settled in the field. These costs are assigned to the insurance company, the applicator, distributors and the manufacturers. Setting aside the losses, the costs for investigating a drift complaint for advisors, and company personnel is astounding. Something like ten man-days of effort for each instance combining field visits, applicator debriefings, sampling and analysis. These costs are almost hidden, sapping the ability to generate income from more positive activities.

The other hidden cost is a rising awareness by regulators that they don't know about all of the drift instances. Most states surveyed expressed some plan to more accurately assess the problems. Here in California, DPR officials have noted their intent to more fully investigate all drift complaints. Even those that are settled amicably between parties. Bottom line, prepare for more scrutiny of each operation.

There is some good that comes out of all of this. An increase in outreach to improve applications. Many different groups are at work, but I would like to focus on a few that have local implications and value. The Western Crop Protection Association has had an Application Stewardship Slide set out for almost five years now. These two sets of slides address technical issues of "big drop/little drop" (lower pressures, larger nozzle orifices, etc.) which will have a direct use for equipment setup. It also addresses decision making for the applicator, (wind direction, application height, etc.). The second slide set specifically addresses decision making process between the grower, PCA, and applicator. It encourages awareness of sensitive areas, and decisions about improper application conditions. The sets are available for sale, or presentations may be made by an Association member.

The Coalition for Drift Minimization has defined a national training curriculum for drift awareness and mitigation education. Surprisingly, several states have little, if any, drift training requirements. The Coalition is developing a videotape for use with applicator and grower groups to impart the messages of managing drift before it happens. The Coalition is also working closely with the Spray Drift Task Force and USEPA on label language for drift management, definitions of "drift", and definitions of "buffer zones". All of these will be useful tools for applicators and PCA's, if done correctly.

The California Agricultural Aircraft Association has recently revised their Operations Guidelines and Best Management Practices manual for aerial applicators. These guidelines address every aspect of the aerial applicators business, including ethics. CAAA also is upgrading monitoring equipment to use in fly-ins to raise awareness of the movement of small droplets off-target.

The National Ag Aviation Association is in the midst of creating a performance based program called PAASS (Professional Aerial Applicator Support System). This program will focus on decision making during applications, and how pilots need to modify behaviors to improve performance.

The Spray Drift Task Force has basically completed its research. The next steps are for USEPA and peer scientists to consider the data, and develop risk assessments to be used for product registration. This may result in label modifications or changes. It will be critical that you as advisors and applicators have input into these labels so that they are meaningful and useful. Stay engaged with the various groups like PAPA and WCPA for these opportunities.

Lastly, a new organization called CURES (Coalition for Urban/Rural Environmental Stewardship), has been created. This organization is a public benefit corporation seeking tax exempt status. The goal of the organization is stewardship and education outreach. Drift Mitigation and education is a key program for CURES to undertake. Several projects being considered are a ground applicator drift education program, a "DRIFT" web site that has access to powerpoint slide presentations, research articles on drift, and key messages to raise awareness of drift issues. CURES may also undertake awareness outreach by radio spot announcements during farm broadcasts, for example during cereal herbicide spray season in the Pacific Northwest. Keep your eyes peeled for more information on CURES!

In closing, I would remind you that there is increasing awareness of drift incidents. There will be increased regulatory scrutiny. There are stewardship programs out there for your use in education and training. But most importantly, there is you. You are the critical piece in the equation. You need to constantly analyze each application, looking for potential problems and solving them. You need to make drift mitigation a normal way of doing business.

Thank you again for this opportunity. I would entertain questions.