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AGRICULTURE

U.S. sidestepping ban against pesticide

The United States signed a treaty barring the use of methyl bromide, but it is so effective that its widespread use continues.

By Rita Beamish

Associated Press

WATSONVILLE, Calif. - Shoppers rifle through store shelves brimming with succulent tomatoes and plump strawberries, hoping to enjoy the fresh fruit before the Western growing season ends. There is no hint of a dark side to the blaze of red.

Strawberries are a painful subject for Guillermo Ruiz. The farmworker believes his headaches, confusion and vision trouble stem from a decade working in the fields with methyl bromide, a pesticide that protects the berries with stunning efficiency.

Cheri Alderman, a teacher whose classroom borders a farm, fears her students could inhale a dangerous whiff of the fumigant as it drifts from the adjacent strawberry field. "A little dribble of poison is still poison," she says.

The concerns stretch globally.

OTHERS WATCHING

Other nations watch as the United States keeps permitting wide use of methyl bromide for tomatoes, strawberries, peppers, Christmas trees and other crops, even though it signed an international treaty banning all but the most critical uses by 2005.

The chemical depletes the earth's protective ozone layer and can harm the human neurological system, an increasing concern as people settle further into what was once just farm country.

Methyl bromide's survival demonstrates the difficulty of banishing a powerful pesticide that helps deliver what both farmers and consumers want: abundant, pest-free and affordable produce.

The Bush administration, at the urging of agriculture and manufacturing interests, is making plans to ensure that methyl bromide remains available at least through 2008 by seeking and winning treaty exemptions. Also, the administration will not commit to an end date.

The administration's "fervent desire and goal" is to end methyl bromide's use, said Claudia McMurray, deputy assistant secretary of state.

The amount of the fumigant that the administration requested under treaty exemptions for the next two years is lower than in 2005. Golf course sod, for instance, won an exemption this year but not next.

"I can't say to you that each year the numbers (of pounds used) would automatically go down," she said.

The reason is that farmers who each year grow Florida tomatoes, California strawberries, Georgia peppers and North Carolina Christmas trees worth billions of dollars are struggling to find a suitable replacement. Alternative organic techniques are too costly and substitute chemicals are not as effective, growers say.

"We're not totally clueless. We've seen this train coming. We've tried every alternative and put every engine on the track, but none of them run," said Reggie Brown, manager of the Florida Tomato Committee.

Odorless and colorless, methyl bromide is a gas that usually is injected by tractor into soil before planting, then covered with plastic sheeting to slow its release into the air. It wipes out plant parasites, disease and weeds. It results in a spectacular yield, reduced weeding costs and a longer growing season.

Workers who inhale enough of the chemical can suffer convulsions, coma and neuromuscular and cognitive problems. In rare cases, they can die.

Less is known about the long-term effects of low levels of contact, said Dr. Robert Harrison, an occupational and environmental health physician at the University of California, San Francisco.

U.S. SIGNED TREATY

The United States signed the Montreal Protocol treaty, committing to phase out methyl bromide by 2005 as part of the effort to protect the earth's ozone layer.

A provision allows for exemptions to prevent "market disruption." The United States has used it to persuade treaty signers to allow U.S. farmers to continue using the chemical.

That exemption process leaves the United States 37 percent shy of the phaseout required by 2005, with at least 10,450 tons of methyl bromide exempted this year. This year's total is higher than it was two years ago.

U.S. officials are heading to a Montreal Protocol meeting in Senegal on Dec. 7 to begin negotiations on exemptions for 2007 and are preparing requests for 2008.

That is not what the treaty envisioned, said David Doniger, senior scientist with the Natural Resources Defense Council.

"Nobody expected you would use the exemptions to cancel the final step of the phaseout or even go backward," Doniger said.