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Farmers, Officials unhappy with NAFTA label progress

By **BLAKE NICHOLSON** Associated Press Writer

The Associated Press - Sunday, June 24, 2007

BISMARCK, N.D.

More than three months after regulators in the United States and Canada announced that pesticides and herbicides in the two countries could be jointly labeled, only two farm chemicals are using the process.

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"Given we've been working on this for 10 years, there's a lot of frustration," North Dakota Agriculture Commissioner Roger Johnson said.

The labeling is voluntary. The farm chemical industry sees progress.

"We think that the work that has been done so far and the 13 products that are done or in process represent substantial actual progress that benefits growers on both sides of the border," said Jay Vroom, president and chief executive of CropLife America, a pesticide trade association based in Washington, D.C.

American farmers have long pushed to import chemicals from Canada, saying they often are cheaper north of the border, but so-called "harmonization" bills failed in Congress.

In March, environmental regulators in the United States and Canada announced the first North American Free Trade Agreement label, for a herbicide marketed as Far-GO in the United States and as Avadex in Canada. It can be used for weed control for a wide range of crops, from wheat to sugar beets.

Under the NAFTA label, a company can get one regulatory label for a product, rather than having to acquire labels in both the United States and Canada.

A 2005 study by North Dakota State University researchers found that U.S. farmers could save \$178 million a year if they have access to pesticides on the Canadian side of the border that are similar in composition to those on the U.S. side. Officials say NAFTA labels can benefit chemical companies by eliminating the expense of different packaging and labeling in the two countries.

Since the March announcement, only one other product has received a NAFTA label: Gavel, a potato fungicide made by Dow

Chemical, according to Environmental Protection Agency spokeswoman Enesta Jones.

"We were hoping there would be more products labeled by now," said Byron Richards, a director with the North Dakota Grain Growers Association who is part of a NAFTA group working on harmonization issues. "But that doesn't mean we're not making progress."

Eighteen farm groups in the two countries, ranging from the National Association of Wheat Growers to the Ontario Bean Producers Marketing Board, sent a letter recently to CropLife America and its counterpart in Canada.

The letter defines what the groups consider "adequate progress" on NAFTA labels - "labels at some stage of development for at least 10 of the 33 priority products" on a list compiled by growers, by the end of the year.

Vroom said CropLife America understands the frustration of farmers but that the industry is committed to the process. "There's a lot to be positive about in terms of what's been accomplished," he said.

Chemical makers have to work with not one, but two government bureaucracies, Vroom said.

Regulators also must deal with a number of issues involving things outside science, such as patent issues and liability laws in the two countries, Vroom said. And companies have to consider branding and marketing programs in both countries.

"As an industry, we're doing as much as we can to make progress," he said.

Richards said some other matters have to be addressed as well,

such as customs issues and the desire of many retailers to have "e-labeling," or labeling via the Internet that would be quicker and possibly cheaper.

The NAFTA group working on chemical harmonization issues meets about four times a year. It is scheduled to meet in Toronto on Monday and Tuesday.

"We understand that this is a new process and there are going to be bumps along the road," said Terry Weckerly, vice president of the North Dakota Grain Growers. "We're just concerned that we stay on track."

Linda Himmelbauer, a regional pesticides team leader for the EPA, said that agency believes there has been "a tremendous amount of progress in NAFTA regulatory harmonization" in the past year.

"EPA is committed to continuing to advance the program," she said.

Johnson, North Dakota's agriculture commissioner, said the biggest roadblock to NAFTA labels was the perception that a joint U.S.-Canadian label would be too cumbersome to create. With the labeling of Far-GO and Gavel, that argument is gone, he said.

"Farmers have a limited amount of patience," Johnson said.

"I'm not inclined to just hope that this thing works without having a very clear eye on whether or not we're actually having applications come forward," said Rep. Earl Pomeroy, D-N.D., "I want to be certain we're not being played for suckers, just a slow dance to nowhere."

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