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The plant health specialist's time has arrived

Chemistry has contributed in wondrous ways to productive agriculture, but these gains have not always been achieved without undesirable effects on our environment.

Chemical fertilizers sometimes have contaminated water supplies and have contributed to salinity of irrigated lands. As pesticides have become more lethal to the pest for which they have been designed, some have become increasingly toxic to humans. Growth regulators have not always been neutral in their action on nontarget organisms. The durability of plastic products has created waste disposal problems of great magnitude.

Modern agriculture depends on the action of a wide array of chemicals. However, with this increased dependence on chemicals we must increase our efforts to see that their use will not be harmful to humans and animals, or the environment.

The past and present use of agricultural chemicals, in the main, has been under the control of the farmer, following the advice of chemical supply firms, University and federal scientists, or Cooperative Extension specialists and advisors. This self-treatment philosophy was adequate when pesticides were mostly simple chemicals of inorganic origin. However, with pesticides evolving into more complex chemicals, many extremely toxic to mammals, it is time to change this historic practice.

Caught between conflicting views of growers who have come to rely on chemicals for agricultural production and non-agricultural interests who feel that agricultural chemicals are detrimental, it is obvious that regulatory agencies and the agricultural industry must find a way to balance these two views by protecting our need to produce adequate and acceptable food and fiber while still protecting people and the environment.

A positive step toward resolving this dilemma and assuring the judicious and efficient use of chemicals in agriculture is to encourage the expansion and further development of the profession of the private plant health expert. These professional practitioners would provide independent third-party advice to producers about the appropriate use of all chemicals in agriculture.

The plant health specialist's role would be similar to that of the practicing veterinarian who deals with animal health. This person would be responsible for managing potentially deleterious agricultural chemicals, and would "prescribe" them only when warranted. Requirements to enter and sustain activity in the profession should be as rigorous as those required of the veterinary profession.

By themselves, pest management educational programs, state licensing regulations, and growing professional awareness among agricultural consultants will not be sufficient to reduce further public pressure for agricultural chemical regulations. Only by proving that adequate public safeguards exist can agriculture respond effectively to the honest concerns of a great many people. And only through the introduction of a system of managing chemicals in a manner which the agricultural industry and the public both perceive as cost-effective and unbiased can a significant step be made toward alleviating some of the serious biological and ecological ills facing us.

By recognizing the need for this private plant health profession and encouraging its development, we will be able to continue producing the food we need while preserving the health of our citizens and the integrity of the physical world in which we live.

Support for agricultural programs

A consolidated report recently completed showed that during the fiscal year ending June 30, 1983 we received a total of 1,187 private gifts and donations for agricultural research and Cooperative Extension programs. The total contribution came to \$5,160,000. In addition, commodity groups operating under 21 state and federally administered marketing orders provided \$3,439,000 for agricultural programs during the fiscal year.

All donations and private grants are reported to the Board of Regents of the University each month, and each is individually acknowledged, but I want to take this opportunity to extend my deep appreciation for the generosity of all those who have contributed their support.