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Water protection progress, but farmers highlight areas for improvement

Most farmers believe it is relatively easy to comply with best practice in pesticide handling areas and water protection, but recognise there is still scope for improvement, according to a survey of farmer behaviour commissioned by The Voluntary Initiative and England Catchment Sensitive Farming Delivery Initiative (ECSFDI).

The survey, conducted between November 2009 and March 2010 by agronomists affiliated to the Agricultural Industries Confederation (AIC), involved 205 mainly arable farms growing at least 50ha of arable crops across England and Scotland. A total of 70,000ha was covered.

Many farmers did not realise that 'pesticides in water' posed a particular problem in their region: 78% scored the issue below 5 on a scale of 1-10, (10 = high priority).

Over 70% of farmers said it was comparatively easy to comply with advice on pesticide handling. However, more than 90% recognised that some further improvements could be made on their farm.

The survey focussed on pesticide filling and handling practices, which are relevant to all pesticides and account for around 40% of pesticide detections in water. The survey confirmed that over 70% of filling activity takes place in farm yards.

Making progress:

- Farmers recognised that spills and poor handling practice at filling were major sources of pesticide losses.
- 95% of farmers disposed of interior tank washings to crops or an environment agency approved disposal site.
- Foil seals on pesticide containers - a potential source of handling area contamination- were being actively managed by 99% of farmers.
- Almost all farmers are 'managing' container caps; although 35% are replacing caps on empty containers - a practice that prevents the container to 'drying out'.
- 94% of farmers believe they are doing a good job rinsing empty containers. Poor container design (85%) and sticky formulations (71%) were cited as the chief reasons for poor cleaning rather than lack of time (11%) or ineffective equipment (3%).

Room for improvement:

- Filling on compacted hardcore (49%) or unmanaged concrete (39%) is not recommended – the best surface is 'managed' concrete leading to a sump or biobed, or in-field filling.
- Failing to use a portable bund or drip-tray under induction bowls (59%)

- Allowing non-sprayer traffic to drive over the pesticide handling area (52%)
- Lack of a full plan of farmyard drains (50%)
- Disposal of exterior sprayer washings to hardcore or drains (33%)
- Disposal of pesticide washings in the sump to hardcore or drains

What the experts say...

“Pesticide handling practice is an area the industry has been working to improve on for over ten years, and we needed to know where things stood,” explained Hazel Doonan, AIC’s head of Crop Protection. “Using agronomists, who farmers trust, allowed us to get an honest appraisal of where we are and what we need to do next.”

For the England Catchment Sensitive Farming Delivery Initiative (ECSFDI), Philippa Mansfield commented: “It is encouraging that so many farmers are addressing issues like foil seals and correct disposal of tank washings. Clearly farmers are making the effort to literally clean up their act. However, there is still scope for improvement as pesticides are still reaching water bodies, with potential impacts on the environment and drinking water quality.”

Patrick Goldsworthy VI Manager and Crop Protection Association water consultant said: “Getting the location and filling surface right is one area farmers need to focus on. There has been confusion over the years as to what is the right surface to use. In recent seasons it has become clear that the best option is managed concrete leading to a sump or a lined biobed.

“The filling area needs to be 10m or more from any water course or drain. This is a long standing requirement from regulators.”

-Ends-

Notes for editors

1. GfK Kinetic provided expert advice to ensure a representative sample of farm types and sizes; analysed data and made checks for statistically significant differences between regions and farm sizes.
2. Full copies of the survey report can be found under reports in the library section of the VI website: www.voluntaryinitiative.org.uk or at http://www.voluntaryinitiative.org.uk/Attachments/Resources/1331_S4.pdf
3. The Agricultural Industries Confederation (AIC) is the leading UK trade association in the agrisupply industry with over 300 members in the agrisupply trade, representing £6.5 billion turnover at farm gate. The Confederation represents a number of agrisupply sectors including: Animal Feed; Crop Protection and Agronomy; Fertilisers; Grain and Oilseeds; and Seed. www.agindustries.org.uk
4. The sponsors of the Voluntary Initiative are the Agricultural Engineers Association, Agricultural Industries Confederation, Country Land and Business Association, Crop Protection Association, National Association of

Agricultural Contractors, the NFU, NFU Scotland and the Ulster Farmers Union.

5. The England Catchment Sensitive Farming Delivery Initiative (ECSFDI) is a partnership project between Defra, Environment Agency and Natural England which offers advice and support to farmers to reduce diffuse water pollution from agriculture. For further information see <http://www.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/landmanage/water/csf/>

Further information

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