



LOOK FAMILIAR? The Curlesses use CP-brand flat-fan spray tips, also found commonly on ground applicators.



AT YOUR SERVICE: Much of central Illinois was a "sweet spot" for fungicide effectiveness in 2008, says Harley Curless. He and son Joe operate Curless Flying Service, Astoria.

Will aerial application become the next target for activists?

A RECENT headline in the *Peoria Journal-Star* said it all: "Chemical spray leads family to take action." The story went on to describe Rick Collins' fight for justice following what he believed to be an overspray of corn fungicide on his babysitter's backyard, where his children were playing. An organic advocate, Collins claimed his children were "still wet with the chemical."

It's unclear whether Collins has an ax to grind, but the situation begs the question: Could aerial application be the next front for anti-agriculture activists? The sharp increase in aerial fungicide application in the past two years has raised the visibility of the practice considerably.

"There needs to be responsibility and accountability in place," says Harley Curless, who operates a flying service in Astoria and McLean. "But we don't need more regulations. We have to be able to do our jobs."

What Curless would like to see is more common sense and more acceptance for rural life. In response to Collins' accusations, Curless points out that fungicide is applied at a rate of 2 gallons per acre — 242 ounces of water plus 14 ounces of fungicide. Given that an acre is 43,560 square feet and a child is perhaps 2 square feet in size, it seems difficult to imagine the child being "wet" from the chemical.

Curless also points out that showering as directed with Nix, a head lice shampoo, exposes individuals to five times more toxicity than they would receive standing in the middle of a cornfield under a spray of fungicide.

How often did they break even?

Based on his trials, Carl Bradley calculated how often fungicide application would have at least paid off in his plots, based on various corn-price and application-cost scenarios.

Corn price (\$/bu.)	Application cost (\$/A)		
	\$24	\$28	\$32
\$3.00	29.9%	26.3%	24.8%
\$3.50	34.3%	29.9%	27.0%
\$4.00	37.2%	34.3%	29.9%
\$4.50	38.7%	36.5%	33.6%
\$5.00	40.1%	37.2%	35.8%
\$5.50	43.1%	39.4%	37.2%

SOURCE: UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS.

Prepared to fly right

SPRING at Curless Flying Service means preparation. Engine overhauls are nearly complete, safety training is taking place, and booms will soon be calibrated to exactly match each plane's wind displacement. For Harley Curless and his son, Joe, spring brings them one step closer to the busy season when, as one of 20 Illinois-based flying services, they'll do their part to cover the 4 million acres of Illinois farmland that will see some kind of aerial application in 2009.

As orders begin to come in, often electronically, Joe will match varying sizes of aircraft to the specific field. The Curlesses operate more than a half dozen planes from their Astoria airfield, with others hired to fill in the gaps as necessary. Among their fleet is a 1,250-horsepower Air Tractor AT-802, equipped with an 800-gallon tank and licensed for

16,000 pounds. A second location in McLean lets them expand their territory, which extends to a 70-mile radius.

And just like a tractor, application aircraft have gone high-tech. On-board GPS units and moving maps show them exactly where they've sprayed, and are used to generate as-applied maps. Two on-board computers log rate and volume, and track location.

Part of their daily in-season regimen includes a safety briefing, which Harley says is part of his industry's efforts to improve its safety record. "Safety is huge around here," he adds.

He looks back to 2007, when seven ag aviators lost their lives on the job nationwide. "Deaths are way down in the past three years, and our goal is to get it at zero."

Normally, their season begins in April with topdressing

of wheat. It continues through corn tasseling, when they'll do 60% of their business in fungicide application. The season wraps up around Labor Day, as they spread turnips and rye seed over beans, creating extra cattle pasture.

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MISSION CONTROL: Even at 150 mph, aerial application is an exact science, and the Curlesses spend time calibrating their planes and booms to ensure accurate product placement.