

An empty pipeline speaks volumes



By TOM J. BECHMAN

ANYONE who's farmed 25 years or more experienced history and didn't know it. The 1970s and '80s were the Roaring '20s for herbicides. What seemed like an endless stream of new products flowed from the chemical company pipeline.

Fast-forward to the late '90s. The pipeline began drying up.

New herbicides with different names, varying combinations of active ingredients or upgraded formulations appear now and again. However, if you track the rabbit back to the hole, it's the same hole: existing chemistry recombined or repackaged.

Syngenta's Chuck Foresman reports that the last truly new corn and soybean herbicide chemistry was approved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 1998, pushing 10 years ago. That's Callisto and Balance technology.

Monsanto's Roundup Ready traits changed the herbicide landscape, beginning in the mid-'90s. Entire chemical companies disappeared. Those remaining spend less money looking for new chemicals.

"We're still looking for them," Foresman says. "It's guaranteed that we won't have success if we don't look. But we've found the easy ones, and the

investment spent looking for new chemistries isn't as big today."

Industrywide investment in the search for truly new herbicides declined about 17% in this decade alone.

Weed rebellion

Are weeds fighting back against glyphosate? Some say yes, while others prefer to put things in perspective.

Currently, Monsanto acknowledges that individual populations of seven weeds in the U.S. are officially tolerant to glyphosate, including two ryegrasses, waterhemp, horseweed (marestalk), Palmer pigweed, and both common and giant ragweed.

"We have trouble with seven weeds out of 170 on the label," Chuck Foresman says. Touchdown is Syngenta's entry in the glyphosate market. He also notes that glyphosate is applied on 165 million acres annually.

Foresman suggests that's an exemplary track record, especially compared to other herbicides that are still widely used, despite weed resistance concerns. For example, 59 of the 80 weeds on the atrazine label have resistance issues.

Farmer views

A 2006 Syngenta survey revealed a striking fact: Farmers believe far more weeds are resistant to glyphosate than the actual seven on the list. And when they need help with herbicide-resistance issues, farmers in the Midwest turn to their local dealer most often. Only one in 50 seek out a chemical company sales representative, and none of the farmers surveyed ask Extension educators. In the southern U.S., one in three turn to Extension first.

Monsanto has stepped up its efforts to educate farmers about weed resistance, beginning about two years ago. Surprisingly, it's not marestalk or giant ragweed that inspired Monsanto to action. "Palmer pigweed really made us take notice," says Jennifer Ralston of Monsanto. This relative of redroot pigweed and waterhemp is extremely aggressive. Glyphosate-resistant Palmer pigweed is officially confined to Georgia.

Still seek herbicides

Syngenta isn't the only company still looking for new chemistry. "We see corn and soybean herbicides as a growth market," says Damon Palmer, Dow AgroSciences. Partly, that's because they're repackaging products to position them as complementary to the Roundup Ready system.

"Glyphosate isn't the answer for all time," he says. "There's lots of selection pressure on that molecule." Plus, data coming from Southern Illinois University indicates that early weed pressure can cause more yield loss than once thought, especially in corn.

"Yes, budgets for research and development are greatly reduced," says Stan Howell of Dow AgroSciences. "But with newer, automated techniques, we're screening as many or more potential molecules today as before."

Briefs

Deere expo set for June 21-23

The association of some 20,000-strong owners of historic John Deere tractors will hold its 2007 exposition on the National Cattle Congress fairgrounds June 21-23 in Waterloo, Iowa. Approximately 500 restored John Deere tractors and implements will be on display all three days. Seminars and presentations will be held on Thursday and Friday along with a swap meet area for John Deere items and parts. Show hours are 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. on June 21-22, and 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. June 23. For more information, go to www.two-cylinder.com/events.htm.

Water-wise ethanol plants

Ethanol plants are big water users. A dry grind plant uses 4 gallons of water for every gallon of ethanol produced. But University of Illinois ag engineers are developing new ethanol refining processes to reduce the water demand by 50% to 85%. Processes being evaluated include use of a membrane that filters out impurities which hamper enzymes in the fermentation stage, as well as separating the starch first to avoid contact between the fermentation bacteria and other kernel elements.

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