

Weed-killer prompts angry divide among US farmers

November 13 2017, by Juliette Michel

When it comes to the herbicide dicamba, farmers in the southern state of Arkansas are not lacking for strong opinions.

"Farmers need it desperately," said Perry Galloway.

"If I get dicamba on (my products), I can't sell anything," responded Shawn Peebles.

The two men know each other well, living just miles apart in the towns of Gregory and Augusta, in a corner of the state where cotton and soybean fields reach to the horizon and homes are often miles from the nearest neighbor.

But they disagree profoundly on the use of dicamba.

Last year the agro-chemical giant Monsanto began selling soy and cotton seeds genetically modified to tolerate the [herbicide](#).

The chemical product has been used to great effect against a weed that plagues the region, Palmer amaranth, or pigweed—especially since it became resistant to another herbicide, glyphosate, which has become highly controversial in Europe over its effects on human health.

The problem with dicamba is that it vaporizes easily and is carried by the wind, often spreading to nearby farm fields—with varying effects.

Facing a surge in complaints, authorities in Arkansas early this summer imposed an urgent ban on the product's sale. The state is now poised to ban its use between April 16 and October 31, covering the period after plants have emerged from the soil and when climatic conditions favor dicamba's dispersal.

A bitter dispute

"Dicamba has affected my whole family," said Kerin Hawkins, her voice trembling. Her brother, Mike Wallace, died last year during an altercation with a worker from a neighboring farm whom he had met to discuss his concerns over the herbicide.

A jury is set to rule on whether Wallace's fatal shooting constituted homicide or self-defense.

This year, the family says, drifting dicamba has affected some 75 acres (30 hectares) of peanuts and 10 acres of new varieties of vegetables planted on their farm, sharply reducing profits.

To protect themselves against the product's impact, the family has decided to plant cotton seeds genetically modified to resist dicamba.

"This is not just a dicamba issue, this is not just a Monsanto issue, this is about how we as human beings treat other people," Kerin Hawkins said.

She was testifying Wednesday at a public hearing in Little Rock, the state capitol, organized by the agency that regulates pesticide and herbicide use in Arkansas.

Immediately afterward the agency called for curbs on the use of dicamba, a decision subject to legislative approval.

So large was the turnout for the hearing that the agency had to move it from its own offices to a meeting room in a hotel. In all, 37 people stepped up to the microphone to explain—often in voices shaking with emotion—why they favored or strongly opposed the product.

Dealing with diversity

"I'm here to tell you we used dicamba and we had a wonderful year," said Harry Stephens, who with his son grows soybeans in Phillips County.

At a time when some younger farmers are struggling to make ends meet, he said, banning dicamba could "put them out of business."

Richard Coy, who raises bees, said dicamba has had a devastating impact on hives located near farm fields where dicamba is in use.

"I lost \$500,000 in honey production and \$200,000 worth of pollination contracts to California farms due to the poor health of my beehives," he said.

On the edge of his [farm](#) field, Perry Galloway points out some of the weeds—dead but still standing, many of them head-high—that ruined several of his past crops.

He has since sprayed dicamba twice over an area of 4,000 acres, and says that "we had the cleanest fields we had in a long time."

He favors a compromise, allowing the herbicide to be applied only once, after plants have sprouted.

But Shawn Peebles, who grows organic vegetables, was able to deal with pigweed by hiring workers to pull them up by hand.

"It is known for a fact dicamba will move," he said. If he gets any in his fields—which has not happened this year—"I have to destroy the crop."

"Diversity is what made agriculture what it is today," he said.

"It is not just dicamba (and) soybeans; there is organic farms such as myself, there is vineyards in Arkansas, and we all need to work together."

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