

Agriculture by Susan B. Cohen

Effort halted to ban 2,4,5-T

The administration moves to fulfill its campaign promise on environmentalist obstruction.

Although Environmental Protection Agency officials are reluctant to discuss the matter, the agency has stopped administrative proceedings under way for more than a year to ban the herbicide 2,4,5-T. The herbicide gained notoriety because of its use as one ingredient in the "Agent Orange" defoliant used in Vietnam during the war. EPA is now negotiating an out-of-court settlement with the Dow Chemical Company, principal manufacturer of the chemical.

"It's fairly clear they didn't make their case," Dow spokesman Rich Long told the *Washington Post*. In March 1980 the EPA began the attempt to ban 2,4,5-T and its sister chemical, Silvex, following complaints made by a group of Oregon residents who claimed that their exposure to 2,4,5-T sprayed on nearby woodlands had caused miscarriages. EPA further sought to prove that the chemicals caused cancers, liver disease, and other disorders. Since 1979 all uses of 2,4,5-T except clearing rangeland and controlling weeds in ricefields have been suspended while EPA moved for a total ban.

Knowledgeable sources report that the settlement will involve more restrictive labeling for 2,4,5-T containers in exchange for continued use. On March 24, Administrative Law Judge Edward B. Finch recessed the hearings after more than a year of testimony. On April 10, the recess was extended until

May 12 at the request of EPA and Dow, the parties to the case, with a progress report to be submitted May 8.

The environmentalist attack on 2,4,5-T was given a powerful boost by the "Agent Orange" flap. "Agent Orange" is made up of a group of chemicals known as the phenoxy herbicides, including 2,4-D, the first modern herbicide, and 2,4,5-T. Both herbicides have been attacked by environmentalists because they contain a trace contaminant, TCDD, or dioxin. By itself dioxin is considered highly toxic.

But there is no evidence that there is any danger from dioxin contamination under normal practical use conditions for either chemical. When applied to 5 million acres over a period of a year, only one ounce of dioxin is present; the amount of dioxin in commercial 2,4,5-T is about 1 part per 100 million. Moreover, dioxin is very rapidly decomposed by sunlight.

The difference in composition and use of Agent Orange, especially with regard to the amount of dioxin (100 to 1,000 times greater) makes comparisons absurd between the chemical warfare agent and the agricultural chemicals. Most damning is the fact that none of the affected veterans showed the primary symptom of dioxin poisoning, namely, chloracne.

The situation with 2,4,5-T could influence the course of a class action suit by Vietnam veterans and

their families. U.S. District Court Judge George Pratt in Waterbury, New York ruled that the manufacturers of the Agent Orange ingredients could be sued; and trials on the question of liability and monetary damages were expected to start before summer.

Eyewitness reports of the meetings held to organize Vietnam vets into the \$45 billion lawsuit certify the fraud of the case. One such meeting, arranged late last fall in the Midwest by a group called Citizens Against Toxic Sprays and the Vet-Line Hot Line, was led by a psychiatrist who held forth for three hours with a two-stage pitch he repeated over and over.

"I know how everyone in this room feels," he would begin. "When your alarm goes off in the morning, you are too tired to get out of bed. You feel weak. You do not want to go to the office. You are all suffering from the symptoms of Agent Orange." Stage two: "We want you to sign up for this suit. We want you to have an exam, and do not be discouraged by the doctors if they cannot find anything wrong with you, because there is no scientific way that the medical profession can prove that you are not suffering from the following symptoms." And then he would take it from the top again.

Reports of sabotage of Forest Service radio shacks used in the annual herbicide spraying program that ordinarily begins on the West Coast in a month or so, and evidence that a "Fishline Alliance" plans to sabotage the spraying program with explosives, can be seen as the environmentalist movement's initial response to the Reagan administration's bold move to call the bluff on their entire operation.