

THE VOLUNTARY INITIATIVE



The Voluntary Initiative

It is now about 18 months since the Crop Protection Association in the UK introduced a 5-year package of measures to reduce environmental impacts of pesticides. Hamish Kidd gives an assessment of progress so far

Introduction

In the latter part of 2000 the UK Government invited the Crop Protection Association to present a package of measures that could be used to achieve the environmental benefits sought by Government as an alternative to a pesticide tax. An initial package of measures was drawn up through a partnership between Government, industry and environmental groups. This original package was revised and a final submission was made in February 2001. The revised proposals were put forward by a stakeholder group consisting of:

- Crop Protection Association
- National Farmers Union
- National Farmers Union of Scotland
- Country Land and Business Association
- United Kingdom Agricultural Supply Trade Association
- National Association of Agricultural Contractors
- Agricultural Engineers Association

The Voluntary Initiative was accepted by the Government on the 1st April 2001, in place of a proposed tax on pesticides used in agriculture and horticulture. The Initiative will last for 5 years and the annual cost to the crop protection industry will be approximately £2.1 million. In addition, it has been estimated that it will cost farmers in the UK £11 million per year to implement the package of measures on individual farms. The Government agreed the objectives of the Initiative and is monitoring progress, but is not responsible for delivery; although it will not provide substantial new money it will consider specific requests for assistance.

The implementation of the Voluntary Initiative is overseen by a Steering Group, under the Chairmanship of Professor Barry Dent, which represents all sectors of farming and the farming industry and includes environmental and wildlife groups. There are observers who are representatives from Government departments, including the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It is tasked to ensure that projects are set up and operated according to an agreed timetable and are resourced to achieve project targets and, in total, deliver environmental benefits to all parts of UK. The Steering Group reports progress to the Minister of the Environment, **Michael Meacher, now Lord Whitty**. The Chancellor of the Exchequer reports progress to Parliament in the Budget and pre-budget statements.

The Voluntary Initiative comprises three pillars and 24 defined projects, some of which have a number of

subprojects: for details and published reports of these projects and subprojects see <http://www.voluntaryinitiative.org.uk>. The responsibility of the Steering Group is to ensure that all component parts of the Initiative are properly monitored relative to agreed time-based targets.

The purpose of the Voluntary Initiative is not primarily to reduce inputs, but to reduce environmental impacts

Pillars

The package of measures, proposed by the crop protection, farming and related industries and agreed by the Government, has a very definite structure. Many projects are also interdependent. The entire programme rests on three pillars. These set a framework in which the programme operates and they provide elements that determine progress on several of the individual projects.

Pillar 1 Establishment of Baseline of Industry Practice

There has been a lack of information relating to the current practices of crop protection applications within UK farming. Pillar 1 is the first comprehensive survey of current application practices conducted throughout the UK. A survey was completed in March 2002 and covered all aspects of the equipment being used and the skills and practices of the person operating the sprayer. A total of 402 farm visits were made and a postal survey of a further 374 farms was added to this. These farms were stratified according to farm type, region and size. Farmers were sampled in all parts of the United Kingdom. A summary of the survey was published in June 2002 and provided important baseline information that will permit "benchmarking" to improve on-farm practice. It will also give guidance on the future direction of other stewardship projects.

Pillar 2 Crop Protection Management Plans

Several stakeholder organisations suggested that farmers should produce whole farm plans that reflect environmental considerations. The farming and crop protection industries agreed to develop and then encourage the adoption of individual farm crop protection management plans as a foundation for the programme. English Nature (EN), the Environment Agency (EA) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) have worked with the farming

bodies to develop the original concept. The overall aim is to place environmental sensitivity at the heart of crop protection. At an individual farm level, the process of building a crop protection management plan identifies the environmental risks to water and biodiversity on the farm, and seeks to ensure that crop protection practices to minimise these risks are in place. The wider farming industry appears to be warming to the introduction and future use of such plans. The recent report from the Policy Commission on the Future of Food and Farming advocated a similar approach, although this report only applies to England. Progress on the plans has been slow but it is anticipated that the project will soon return to be on-schedule. Although the scope and depth of the plans has still to be agreed by the Steering Group, draft guidance documents, to assist growers and their agronomists, are now being prepared.

Pillar 3 Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan for the Crop Protection Industry

Biodiversity has become a major issue for environmentalists, the public and farmers. Although the term is often misapplied, there is now a flow of information from government and academia on how improvements can be made within the farming context. In the Voluntary Initiative, the Crop Protection Association (CPA) made a commitment to biodiversity by forming a biodiversity network to help communication from the crop protection industry and from a range of other sources to farmers and growers. The main conduit for this flow would be provided by the agronomists working for member companies within the CPA. This will assist the recognition of biodiversity issues in UK farming and the transfer of key messages to those who can make greatest use of them. Although delayed until December 2001, a biodiversity officer has now been appointed and a biodiversity network has been established within the crop protection industry. A Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan for the industry is currently being developed. The Biodiversity Officer is responsible for three projects aimed at raising awareness of biodiversity issues within the crop protection industry.

The 24 projects in the programme can be categorised under a number of headings.

Increasing environmental awareness

Research

The CPA has confirmed its support for the Sustainable Arable Link Programme by committing more central management time to the facilitation of research initiatives amongst its members. To this end, the long-term research needs of the industry have been identified and the Association will sponsor a number of workshops/forums each year to encourage the industry and researchers in further collaboration. The CPA has also increased its overall contribution to research by becoming actively involved in three major projects. These aim to increase wildlife in conventional farming systems, reduce spray drift whilst increasing application work rates and improve the management aspects of weed control. A plan has also been developed to enhance the CPA obligations as a Foresight

Associate member (within the UK Foresight Programme) in order to identify future environmental issues and research needs.

Sprayer Wash Down

The CPA has confirmed support for the existing Environment Agency study (jointly funded by Defra, Scotland and Northern Ireland Forum for Environmental Research (SNIFFER), Pesticide Safety Directorate (PSD) and others) on pesticide handling and sprayer wash-down areas and it has commissioned, with Defra, a final complementary study on the use of 'biobeds'. Biobeds are structures that can be installed on farms to reduce potential point source pollution from accidental losses of spray concentrate during filling and mixing and from pesticide washings that cannot be applied to crops. Once the results are available, the CPA has agreed to lead the resulting technology transfer process.

Information

A key element of the Voluntary Initiative has been initiated by CPA members to produce publicly available environmental information for 1000 products marketed in the UK. The guidelines for the preparation of the information sheets have now been finalised. An auditing system has been devised to ensure the quality of the environmental information. The first sheets covering 60 products are now published on the Voluntary Initiative web site.

The CPA agreed to promote a co-ordinated campaign to encourage best practice and the uptake of the latest techniques using the farming media. In parallel to this activity, the CPA and UKASTA distributor companies have now run more than 90 'Roadshows' for sprayer operators on the subject of "Avoiding Water Pollution". The CPA has produced, with the assistance of the water supply companies, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) and the Environment Agency (EA), a new booklet on water protection "Every Drop Counts". Following completion of the crop protection application survey (Pillar 1) the United Kingdom Agricultural Supply Trade Association (UKASTA), CPA and others are assessing the influence that infrequent users can have on the environmental impact of crop protection chemicals and will then design materials and advice for this type of user. UKASTA, aided by the Home Grown Cereals Authority (HGCA) and by small regional distributors based outside the main arable areas, prepared a simple questionnaire to broaden the information database on the infrequent user. The information gathered will be used to design future activities.

Training

The CPA distributor member companies have agreed that all their agronomists will be members of the BASIS Professional Register. BASIS are currently working with the RSPB, the Environment Agency, English Nature and others throughout the UK to ensure the professional register and other training schemes and qualifications place a real emphasis on environmental issues. As part of a project to increase environmental awareness through environmental auditing, the CPA has maintained and strengthened its support and assistance to the Environmental Management Agriculture (EMA) system

developed by the University of Hertfordshire. This is being done by developing new modules covering crop protection decisions relating to cultural controls. It is also examining ways to further promote the use of the EMA audit on farms throughout the UK. To avoid the risk of compromising the existing statutory BASIS certificate, the concept behind a project to improve farmer competence in crop protection decision making has been redeveloped. BASIS and the National Proficiency Test Council (NPTC) have put forward proposals to the Steering Group for a new certificate of competence for farmers titled "Environmental Management-Crop Protection". This changes the emphasis to environmental management and will ensure farmers are capable of generating their own crop protection management plans.

Reducing environmental impacts

Protecting Water

A working group has been formed by the CPA, farming organisations, Water UK and the Environment Agency, to develop and implement local water catchment protection plans. A "toolbox" of suitable measures has been identified and 'local action groups' are being formed in six pilot water catchments across the UK to develop specific local stewardship campaigns. A Scottish catchment has also recently been identified for inclusion in this project and is to involve Scottish Water, CPA, SEPA and NFUS. Relevant water quality indicators will also be developed to measure the effectiveness of these programmes. This initiative has the potential to contribute positively to the UK implementation of the Water Framework Directive (WFD). A project to promote awareness and compliance with LERAPs (Local Environmental Risk Assessment for Pesticides) is dependent on information derived from the application practices survey in Pillar 1. Once this survey has been completed, signatories have agreed to examine the effectiveness and adoption of LERAPs. Ways of simplifying the scheme and/or improving adoption and compliance will be developed.

Information for agronomists

The CPA commissioned an analysis of the information needs of agronomists advising farmers and the report with recommendations was published at the end of February. This will be used to focus future training of agronomists working within the industry. The CPA has also strengthened its auditing process for the training of those employed by its member companies and the first annual report has been produced.

Reducing waste

The CPA and other stakeholders have completed two fundamental studies, which together evaluate the options for the disposal of pesticide packaging waste and the potential for increasing environmental safety through reusable containers. These reports are expected to appear on the Voluntary Initiative web-site in the near future. Planning has begun for a second national pesticide retrieval scheme in 2004 which aims to improve environmental safety by removing old and "expired" product from farms.

Integrated Crop Management

The crop protection industry has long advocated the use by farmers of integrated crop management and integrated farm management techniques. These systems, supported by Government, aim to maximise the synergy of all farm and crop protection techniques rather than rely on any single technique. They may provide environmental benefits within conventional farming systems. A major achievement in the Voluntary Initiative has been the joint funding, by the CPA and Defra, of a research project to accurately assess the uptake of Integrated Farm Management (IFM) techniques. This repeats a study carried out in 1996 and will provide a measure of progress in the period and will identify where targeted actions can be applied.

Certification of Operators

The Farming Unions and others agreed to set up a central register of active certificated spray operators using "continuous professional development" as a means of ensuring ongoing training. With good support from BASIS and NPTC this initiative has been fully scoped, and the formal launch will take place at "Sprays and Sprayers" in June 2002.

Product Labelling

The project, aimed at improving product label clarity for users, has been delayed. Now that the Pesticide Safety Directorates 'labelling guidelines' have been published and other impending changes in regulation clarified, work is now underway on the production of industry best-practice guidance notes for labelling.

Sprayer Testing

The Farming Unions, CPA, and the Agricultural Engineers Association (AEA) also agreed to work with other interested parties to develop a universally acceptable annual low-cost sprayer-testing scheme. The same group undertook to evaluate the opportunity for developing a basic sprayer checklist, which could also be promoted in conjunction with the more authoritative sprayer test. The framework of the scheme has been agreed by the Steering Group. Detailed proposals which include the training and assessment of examiners, a sprayer checklist for operators and a database of active sprayers are currently being formulated. It is hoped that the AEA's existing databases will form the basis of the new database. The examiner certification will be launched in June 2002, with the training and assessment of examiners starting in the autumn. The existing AEA scheme will run concurrently until the formal launch of the revised scheme in November 2002.

Nozzle Design

Spray equipment and, in particular spray nozzles, play a major role in ensuring accurate crop protection applications. A preliminary report on key nozzle features has been completed. This will be supplemented by information from the application survey (Pillar 1) which will be used to support new materials and operator training later in the year.

Sulfuric Acid Application

Under another project the CPA and the National Association of Agricultural Contractors (NAAC) agreed to work with other interested parties to produce a Code of Practice for the contract application of sulfuric acid (sulfuric acid is used to desiccate the stems and leaves of potato crops before harvesting). This will help specialist application contractors to minimise any potential environmental impacts of sulfuric acid applications. The Code was ready for publishing at the end of December 2001 but it was decided to await guidance from the Advisory Committee on Pesticides relating to the approval of the compound, and was published in June 2002.

Resources

When the Voluntary Initiative was agreed the CPA estimated that the total cost to its member companies would be £11.9 million spread over the 5-year period. This was comprised of several elements and included costs of staff time and actual financial expenditure. Costs to the farming sector were estimated to average out at about £11 million per annum with the greatest expenditure occurring in years two to five. These related mainly to training and improvements in spraying equipment and facilities; they would be borne by individual farmers and growers. The start of some projects was delayed so expenditure has been a little less than planned for this first year. However, initial cost estimates suggest that the overall expenditure in this period has been approximately £2.4 million. Figures were confirmed in the Chairman's Report to Ministers in September 2002.

Progress so far

Progress has been achieved in all aspects of the Voluntary Initiative during the first year, although some projects did suffer delays. The Steering Group has met five times and there has been at least one in-depth review of each project. Members have provided advice and guidance on progressing the Initiative and its projects. The initial stages of such a comprehensive programme inevitably involve the development of infrastructures and mechanisms to achieve dialogue

between stakeholders and other interested parties. These have now been achieved and progress is expected to accelerate. Most projects are on-target and remedial action has been taken on any problems as they have arisen.

One of the main challenges is to get
greater uptake of the Initiative by farmers.
They first have to understand what it
means.....

The selection of an easily identified and succinct name for the initiative together with a logo has allowed publicity to start. It is now possible for farmers and others to recognise easily individual initiatives and projects that relate to the overall programme of measures. Communication to farmers is vitally important, and is a task not to be underestimated – not only do they have to understand the principles of the Initiative itself but also understand the details of best practice and environmental protection. This is a continuing process – with more information being constantly published in printed publications and on the website.

The Environmental Audit Committee of the House of Commons took verbal evidence concerning the progress of the Initiative in October and its report has been published. This report will be studied closely not only by the crop protection industry, Government and environmental bodies which are directly affected by this particular Initiative, but, since this is the first such voluntary agreement in place of environmental taxation, it will also be closely watched by other groups who might wish to propose similar voluntary agreements in the future. The report entitled *Pesticides: The Voluntary Initiative. A Report together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence and Appendix* can be obtained from HMSO (ISBN 0215 00 644 5).

A web-site (<http://www.voluntaryinitiative.org.uk>) has been developed with information about the Initiative and reports from many of the projects and subprojects.

VISIT OUR WEBSITE

Have a look at the *Pesticide Outlook* website on <http://www.rsc.org.uk>