

19 SEP 2003

PARAQUAT-FARMERS

MANY FARMERS STILL SUPPORTIVE OF PARAQUAT USE

By: T.J. Khoo

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 19 (Bernama) -- To paraquat or not to paraquat, that is the question facing many farmers in the country.

The country's Pesticides Board has successfully won endorsement from the authorities to ban the use of paraquat from September 2005 because of its high toxicity.

But many farmers feel that they want to stick to paraquat in view of its efficacy in controlling weeds.

In view of paraquat's quick-acting compound, padi farmers can work on their fields 24 hours after applying the herbicide instead of 10 days if another type of herbicide, glyphosate isopropylamine, is used.

Besides padi farmers, those engaged in other agriculture activities such as pepper, cocoa, oil palm and rubber also use paraquat widely at present.

Paraquat, a nitrogen-based herbicide, is globally employed for weed control because it is not expensive. Its quick-acting and non-selective mixture destroys green plant tissues on contact, thus saving farmers and smallholders precious time and money to eradicate their padi fields, farms and plantations of unwanted weeds and grass.

A committee member of the Chenderong Balai Area Farmers Organisation, Abdul Rani, said padi farmers could increase their output by up to 10 tonnes per hectare using the weedkiller.

Other types of weedkiller, he said, took a longer time, some up to 10 days, to rid weeds on their padi plots compared to paraquat, which worked almost immediately.

"It saves us a lot of time and enables us to increase our padi output as envisioned by the government," Abdul Rani said recently.

Padi farmers said they could increase their harvest by up to 10 tonnes per hectare using paraquat.

And they want a meeting with officials from the Pesticides Board to air their grouses as to why the herbicide which they had been using for more than 40 years would be banned. So far the board's officials have not entertained requests for such a meeting.

Malaysian Palm Oil Association (MPOA) vice-chairman Boon Weng Siew says a meeting with the board's officials would help clear the air about paraquat.

Padi farmers feel that with their myriad of pressing challenges such as controlling diseases affecting their crops, they do not need another set of problems resulting from the removal of a trusted herbicide.

Who will compensate them for their loss, they often ask.

Padi farmers have long said that paraquat did not pose groundwater contamination and studies by five universities in the United States concluded that "paraquat does not present a high risk of groundwater contamination." One of the agencies which funded the study was the US Department of Agriculture.

A spokesman for 15,000 padi farmers in Seberang Prai Utara, Mohamad Saad Saat, said recently that paraquat saved costs in farm work as well as planting time compared to glyphosate.

"We have been using paraquat for a long time and are skilled with the application rules," he said. "Glyphosate has lasting effects deep underground and as such, plants cannot live long. Besides, it is also more expensive."

The five American universities study also disclosed that the US government found paraquat to be effective in destroying marijuana. Even the Mexican government uses it to wipe out this illegal crop.

Saba anak Aling, a farmer and village headman from Sarikei, Sarawak, said paraquat "works on the surface but glyphosate sinks deeper into the ground, thus giving long-lasting effect."

Both Saad and Saba said paraquat was safe but had often been misused.

"As a weedkiller, paraquat has been very effective but it had been misused by some to take their own lives. As such, it has been labelled as dangerous," said Saad.

To deter those with suicidal tendencies from consuming paraquat, manufacturers have added an agent that causes violent vomiting if consumed. It also has a sharp odour to serve as a warning.

The Malaysian Palm Oil Association (MPOA), the National Association of Smallholders (NASH) and the Malaysian Estate Owners Association (MEOA) had said in a joint statement recently that banning paraquat would cost the country a cumulative loss of RM2.73 billion over 10 years. It would also seriously hurt the competitiveness of Malaysian palm oil internationally.

The three bodies said the ban would hurt more than 700,000 smallholder farmers and 3,000 estates that use paraquat.

MPOA, NASH and MEOA also commissioned a study by Intercedent Asia on the impact of the paraquat ban on the rubber and oil palm sectors.

Their study found that the ban would have serious economic repercussions, including a RM1.57 billion increase in cumulative weed control cost and RM1.16 billion in cumulative crop yield loss.

The ban would also cause a majority of 700,000 smallholders who use paraquat to suffer an annual income loss of up to 7.0 percent in the medium term, representing almost one month's income, and would also seriously hurt Malaysia's palm oil competitiveness from higher production cost and lower crop yield.

The Intercedent Asia study also found that paraquat retained the root structure, thereby helping to prevent soil erosion.

But the most pertinent issue of the ban is that users of paraquat may be forced to turn to the illegal market where they could be exploited with sub-standard products, thus placing themselves and the environment under more harm.

The MPOA has warned that Malaysian palm oil could face strong competition from its biggest rival, Indonesia, which is among 120 countries that allow the use of paraquat. Others include India, Vietnam, Japan, Australia and the United States.

NASH president Datuk Mazlan Jamaluddin said, "We are representing more than 700,000 smallholders who disagree with the ban. It would reduce the income of oil palm and rubber smallholders by 6.8 percent and 5.8 percent respectively."

On Sept 8, 200 farmers in Sungai Gedung near Bagan Serai unfurled a 300 metre-long long banner bearing 5,000 signatures of farmers across the country urging the nation's leaders to intervene on their behalf. This was the second gathering of farmers in two months after 15,000 padi farmers in Seberang Prai Utara District had gathered on July 14 to urge the government to reconsider the ban.

The banner was to be handed to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, to seek their intervention to rescind the ban.

On Sept 10, Deputy Agriculture Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Shariff Omar announced that the ban on paraquat would remain despite appeals by padi farmers.

Although the herbicide was popular among farmers and smallholders, he

said it had to be banned because paraquat was very toxic.

He also urged farmers to use other types of weedkillers which were less toxic such as glyphosate.

But farmers have countered that they could only start working their fields 10 days after glyphosate was applied.

What had irked the farmers most was the refusal of the Pesticides Board to listen to them on the adverse impact of the ban on their livelihood. They are also upset that the board did not consider its economic implications.

The board had on Aug 27, 2002 issued a circular that applications to register or to re-register paraquat would be rejected. All applications under process will be stopped and previously registered products will be phased out in stages.

There are now 113 registrations for paraquat. The last of the list will come up for re-registration in September 2005 but with the ban this means that in two years from now, paraquat will cease to be legally available in Malaysia.

Since its Aug 27 circular, the board has been relatively silent. Its officials had said the ban would stay with no further review by the board as it was a Cabinet decision.

Meanwhile, Razak Lajis of the National Poison Centre at Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang, likened the paraquat ban to banning smoking.

"Some sectors would like to ban smoking. But they fail to take into consideration the economic aspects of it."

However, he suggested: "If paraquat manufacturers can come out with a new compound with less toxicity and just as effective, then we will see how things go. But the directive will have to come from the Pesticides Board."

-- BERNAMA

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