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Handlers Of Benlate Show Health Problems



November 26, 1992 | By Vicki Vaughan of The Sentinel Staff

Volunteer toxicologists said Wednesday that their examination of a group that had handled the Du Pont Co. fungicide Benlate DF revealed several health problems.

In a report to federal occupational health officials, the toxicologists said they examined a sample of 12 people - 10 growers and two nursery employees. Each experienced one or more symptoms, including "chest pains, forgetfulness, fatigue and skin lesions," said Hildegarde Sacarello, a toxicologist and vice president of Hy-Tox Inc. in Lake Mary.

The meeting was called by officials with the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, or NIOSH, who asked to meet with environmental groups after hearing their complaints.

Sacarello's company volunteered to examine the growers for an environmental group, the Grassroots Environmental Cooperative, based in Citra.

But after hearing Sacarello's report, NIOSH officials said it is too soon to talk about action.

Edward Hoekstra, NIOSH medical officer, told the meeting of volunteer toxicologists and environmentalists that NIOSH "is here on a fact-finding mission. We're just here to get as much information as we can." He would not say whether NIOSH would take any action.

Du Pont has paid about \$500 million in crop-loss claims for damages caused by the chemical, with about \$400 million of that paid to Florida growers. The company recalled Benelate in 1991 after nurseries and strawberry, watermelon and cucumber growers began complaining of stunted root and plant growth.

Du Pont said Tuesday that it will prove Benelate did not cause \$1 billion in crop damage. The company offered to give state officials two years' worth of research to back its claim. Company officials could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

Sacarello showed the NIOSH officials slides of Benelate users, pointing out what she said were skin lesions, cuts that would not heal, discoloring of the throat and swollen knuckles.

Robert Haines, an environmental consultant and a writer for Florida Environments, an environmental newsletter in Orange Park, said growers need to think of constructive ways to get the Florida Legislature to appropriate at least \$200,000 to study Benelate's effects.

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