

Survey finds heavy use of atrazine

3/26/91

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Atrazine, an inexpensive weed-killer that has shown up in tiny amounts in Iowa ground water, is still king in Iowa's cornfields.

The herbicide is used on 61 percent of the state's corn acres, according to a survey of fertilizer and pesticide use mandated by the 1990 Farm Act and released Wednesday by Iowa Agricultural Statistics, a state and federal agency.

Because the survey is new, government officials have little to compare it with. But other surveys by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Iowa State University confirm that the pesticide is widely used, although the amount of acreage covered with the chemical may be declining slightly.

The survey also suggests that use of nitrogen fertilizer, one of the sources of increasing nitrate levels in drinking water in Des Moines and Iowa City, may have declined in the last five years — to 127 pounds per acre on corn.

In 1985, a government survey of fertilizer use showed that Iowa farmers used 2.3 million pounds of nitrogen. The survey didn't break down how much of that went on corn or soybeans, but most nitrogen fertilizer normally is used on corn. If all of the nitrogen applied in 1985 went on corn, farmers would have used about 163 pounds of nitrogen per acre, said Howard Holden, assistant statistician for Iowa Agriculture Statistics.

Iowa's nitrogen use on corn is now below the national average of about 130 pounds. Farmers used 164 pounds per acre in Illinois last year, 134 pounds per acre in Missouri. Minnesota's nitrogen usage was below Iowa's — averaging 113 pounds per acre.

Holden said he thinks that's because Iowa farmers are beginning to use a new soil test developed at Iowa State University to cut down on unnecessary fertilizer use.

Although Holden's agency and researchers at Iowa State University have periodically looked at how much pesticide and fertilizer farmers use, the latest survey was the most detailed look at chemicals used in Iowa on specific crops — corn and soybeans — since 1985.

It was part of the agency's annual crop production survey for 1990 and was based on interviews with 1,500 farmers conducted in the summer and fall of 1990.

Besides using an average of 127 pounds of nitrogen per acre of corn, farmers used 58 pounds of phosphorous and 74 pounds of potash. Farmers used the most nitrogen — 144 pounds per acre — in the southeast crop reporting district. They used the least — 114 pounds per acre — in northwest Iowa.

On soybeans, Iowa farmers used an average of 33 pounds of nitrogen per acre, 42 pounds of phosphorous and 57 pounds of potash.

Atrazine use on corn varied across the state. It was used on 91 percent of the corn acreage in southeast Iowa and on 44 percent of the acreage in west-central Iowa.

Holden couldn't explain why the statewide average of atrazine use on 61 percent of the Iowa corn acreage was higher than in a similar survey by ISU economists. That survey showed that atrazine was used on 39 percent of Iowa's corn acreage in 1989, a slight decline from 42 percent in 1985.