

Toxic inaction on farm chemicals

In a staunch defiance against growing calls for a ban on extremely hazardous farm chemicals, including paraquat, the Department of Agriculture has started registering farmers who still want to use the chemicals on their plantations.

On June 5, the Department of Agriculture — a key proponent of these herbicides — urged farmers to register quickly with the agency to ensure approval for the right to use the toxic chemicals.

It said the farmers should register a week after they start their harvest, or they may “lose the right to use” paraquat and the other two chemicals, namely glyphosate and chlorpyrifos.

Together with registration, which requires farmers to give information about the location and size of their farms, the agency said it would conduct an eligibility test, meaning only those who know how to use the toxic chemicals correctly will be granted the right to purchase and use them.

Those who fail will have to attend training sessions provided by the department and then pass a test.

If everything goes as planned, the first test is scheduled to take place on July 1.

Dares Kittiyopas, deputy chief of the Agriculture Department, acknowledged the long-term effects on users’ health from the three chemicals. Paraquat, with a market name of Gramoxone, is a popular chemical among Thai farmers.

Thailand, a major food exporter, ranks in the world’s top five farm chemical importers. The country imported about 44,501 tonnes of paraquat last year, compared with 31,525 tonnes in 2016.

According to news reports, the state agency has issued five directives which stipulate measures to restrict the use of the chemicals.

The restrictions, which will take effect on Oct 20, call for individual farmers understand the correct amount of the chemicals to use on their land and limit their use “as necessary”.

Farmers in watershed areas, according to the department, will have to refrain from using the toxic chemicals completely.

However, the agency has ruled out a total ban. Last August, it issued a regulation prohibiting the use of the chemicals on vegetables and herbs. Currently, the substances remain allowed for use on major cash crops, including cassava, corn, palm oil and on fruit plantations.

Some may see registration as a way to regulate the use of the chemicals. Proponents of toxic substances vehemently insist they are “safe if correctly applied”.

They stick to this ethos regardless of the fact that research studies indicate paraquat contaminates the environment and enters the food chain.

Fifty-three countries, including Vietnam, Laos and recently China, a major paraquat exporter, have banned paraquat. Some 17 countries limit the use of all three chemicals.

Several studies conducted by local researchers have found that using these herbicides has had a negative effect on the health of Thai farmers.

The Public Health Ministry, through local hospitals, is also alarmed by the rise in cases of illnesses caused by the chemicals.

A health expert at Mahidol University has found paraquat could be transferred from a pregnant mother to her baby in the womb.

A study by Jutamaad Satayavivad, Associate Vice-President for Scientific Affairs at Chulalongkorn University, found women exposed to glyphosate had an increased risk of breast cancer and were more prone to miscarriages.

The Department of Agriculture, which is a member of the national committee on hazardous substances, has been at odds with other state agencies such as the Public Health Ministry, academics and food safety activists which, over the past two years, have pushed for a ban.

The concerns drew attention from the Office of the Ombudsman which demanded the hazardous substances committee implement its proposed ban on paraquat or it would be held responsible for negligence of duty.

Yet the department was adamant that imports should continue.

It has downplayed the impact of the chemicals while insisting their use is still necessary as "there are no substitutes that give the same results".

There are allegations that some agro-giants, which are also on the panel, are behind the refusal to go through with an outright ban.

There are also questions about whether registration and restriction will really work given the practicalities involved, with some predicting the effect will be superficial at best.

In fact, the department's attempt to regulate the use of paraquat, glyphosate, and chlorpyrifos, looks dubious.

It could even be a tactic by the state, and the agro-giants striving to protect their interests, to persuade the public that something is being done about a matter which has drawn widespread concern when, actually, very little is being done at all.