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Costa Rica To Phase Out Dangerous Pesticide

by LADB Staff

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Seeking to make a bold statement about sustainable development practices, the Costa Rican government has officially launched plans to eliminate a dangerous pesticide from farming practices here over the next six years. The UN-backed initiative to phase out the toxic agrochemical known as methyl bromide is hailed by officials as the largest environmental project to be undertaken here in the past decade. It is also considered the most ambitious project of this nature ever in all of Latin America, according to Alvaro Umana, a Costa Rican who currently leads the Environmentally Sustainable Development Group for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), based in New York.

"This is definitely going to be an important experiment, considering the [agricultural] conditions that exist in Latin America and in Costa Rica," Umana told The Tico Times during a brief visit here last week. Umana, who was Costa Rica's Environment Minister under President Oscar Arias (1986-1990), praised Costa Rica for proactively eradicating methyl bromide by promoting farming alternatives. Phase-out has UN backing While the preliminary legwork for the phase-out has been underway for about two years, it was not until March 7 that current Environment Minister Elizabeth Odio signed an agreement with the UNDP that will provide the necessary financial backing to make the plans a reality.

With the agreement, Costa Rica gets just over US\$4.8 million through the Multilateral Fund of the UN's Montreal Protocol, a worldwide accord that establishes a timetable to significantly reduce consumption of ozone-depleting substances such as methyl bromide. Costa Rica ratified the Montreal Protocol in July 1998, and began to seriously analyze alternatives to methyl bromide the following year. The Multilateral Fund, funded mainly by industrialized nations, was set up in 1990 by the parties to the Protocol to help developing countries meet their targets.

The transition here will not come easily, officials and scientists readily admit. Costa Rica figures among those Latin American countries that rely most heavily on methyl bromide as a pesticide, primarily in the cultivation of melons, flowers, bananas, and tobacco. The chemical is among the most effective at controlling insects, nematodes, weeds, and pathogens in an array of crops and consequently is one of the most difficult to replace. Costa Rica imported more than 900 metric tons of the chemical in 1999 alone, according to the latest available data provided by the Universidad Nacional's Regional Institute for Toxic Substance Studies (IRET). Recent estimates place that number at more than 1,000 MT per year. Consumption here has more than doubled since 1992, when 450 MT were imported, according to IRET.

"Costa Rica must concern itself not only with its international business image, but also with its environmental commitments," said Fernando Ramirez, an agricultural researcher with IRET who has been working to educate melon farmers about the dangers of methyl bromide. As the first country in Latin America to take definitive steps to phase out the substance, "Costa Rica has the opportunity to serve as an important example" in the region, Ramirez added.

Costa Rican ban will beat deadline by seven years

By pushing for a complete halt to the chemical's consumption by 2008, Costa Rica is actually going above and beyond the mandates of the Montreal Protocol, which calls for elimination of methyl bromide in industrialized nations by 2005 and in developing nations by 2015. The only exceptions to the Montreal Protocol are those classified as "critical uses," which include emergency fumigation of plague-infested crops entering or exiting the country. "We think that [by 2015], the damages could be enormous, and that's why we need to eliminate it now," said Odio, after signing the funding agreement with UNDP.

The Montreal Protocol, which has been ratified by 181 countries as of August 2001, is based on the premise that certain man-made substances are contributing to depletion of the ozone layer, an atmospheric blanket of sorts that protects the planet from damaging ultraviolet rays. High on the chemical blacklist is methyl bromide, which is believed to decompose when it interacts with the sun's rays, releasing radicals that attack molecules that form the ozone layer.

Besides the atmospheric considerations, the chemical is considered highly dangerous by the World Health Organization (WHO) for its toxic effects on human beings. Milder symptoms that can result from contact include headaches, nausea, vomiting, blurred vision, speech difficulties, and convulsions. More serious health problems include central nervous system disorders, respiratory irritation, congestion, chest pain, and chronic fatigue. Prolonged exposure to methyl bromide has also been linked to comas and death, according to the IRET and various international health organizations.

The government is working with the Universidad Nacional, University of Costa Rica, Technological Institute, National Melon Farmers and Exporters Chamber, and Costa Rican Floriculture Association to implement the transition away from the agrochemical. With the funding, the government is now prepared to begin providing incentives consisting of equipment, materials, and technical assistance to the country's major methyl bromide users, mainly the larger melon producers who can afford to import it, according to IRET's Ramirez. Some 8,000 hectares in Costa Rica are dedicated to melon production, and some 10% to 15% of that land is now farmed using alternatives to methyl bromide, thanks to experiments carried out over the past two years, Ramirez said.

A fundamental part of the campaign to eradicate methyl bromide hinges on acceptance by farmers of these alternatives. For example, the country's producers are testing the waters with organic and composting solutions, as well as disinfecting techniques using water vapor, solar energy, and other chemical substances when necessary. Minister Odio classified these efforts as one way Costa Rican products can reach international agricultural markets bearing "an enormous green stamp."

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