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Few NAFTA labels for farm chemicals

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BISMARCK, N.D. --

In announcing a joint label for farm pesticides and herbicides last year, regulators in the United States and Canada called it a milestone in the reduction of trade barriers. A year later, only four chemicals have a NAFTA label.

Only one of those chemicals is expected to be widely used in the field, and only one is on a list of 33 "priority" products compiled by 18 farm groups in the two countries. It remains to be seen whether the new labels will save farmers money.

"It would be a stretch to say I'm happy with the progress," said North Dakota Agriculture Commissioner Roger Johnson, who is president of the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture. "The progress has been slow."

Jay Vroom, president and chief executive of CropLife America, a pesticide trade association based in Washington, D.C., said the industry is committed to the NAFTA label process and it is gaining momentum.

"The fact that we've seen progress indicates it's not just talk," Vroom said.

Some officials say U.S. farmers may not see true cost savings until import duties and other fees are reduced or eliminated.

Farmers have long pushed for chemical "harmonization," saying prices for the same product often differ in Canada and the United States. A 2005 North Dakota State University study determined that American farmers could save \$178 million each year through access to pesticides north of the border that are similar in composition to those on the U.S. side.

So-called harmonization bills failed in Congress, but last March, state and federal officials announced that farm chemical manufacturers could jointly label their products in the United State and Canada rather than acquire separate registrations in the two countries.

Since the first NAFTA label was announced, for a herbicide marketed as Far-GO in the United States and as Avadex in Canada, only three more have received labels, said Jim Gray, the lead farm chemical regulator in North Dakota.

Gray said Far-GO is the only one of the four NAFTA label chemicals on the priority list the grower groups compiled last year. The groups, ranging from the National Association

of Wheat Growers to the Canadian Horticulture Council, said last June that they wanted labels for at least 10 of the 33 priority products to be in some stage of development by the end of 2007.

Byron Richard, president of the North Dakota Grain Growers Association, sees progress.

The latest chemical to be jointly labeled - Simplicity - "is the first true broadleaf and grass herbicide that will be labeled on wheat and durum," he said. "It will have wide use."

Unlike the first three chemicals with NAFTA labels, Simplicity is considered "new chemistry" that had not been registered in either the U.S. or Canada.

"The consensus of the industry was that it would probably be better to go with new chemistries under this NAFTA label rather than bring old labels forward," Richard said.

Vroom said it is easier to get a NAFTA label for a new chemical than for an old one, especially one that has many uses.

"The highest percentage of success will be on new products," he predicted.