

Paraquat still present

By CATHERINE SIEGNER
Of the Emerald

Remember paraquat? Last spring, pot smokers were frantically examining their stash for traces of the poisonous substance Mexican officials with U.S. government support, were spraying onto marijuana fields.

Unlike swine flu and comet Kahoutek, paraquat was, and still is, a reality.

Paraquat is one of the most toxic substances known. Seven drops of the herbicide can kill a 150-pound person, and smoking marijuana treated with it can produce permanent lung and tissue damage.

When the paraquat scare was at its height in April and May, the University's Drug Information Center (DIC) was sending hundreds of marijuana samples to Pharmchem laboratory in Palo Alto, Calif. for testing.

45 samples from around the U.S. were found to contain paraquat at Pharmchem. However, the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta retested the same samples later and found only one positive result in the group.

Dale Gordon, information specialist for the DIC, said the testing procedures were different, and may account for the different results.

"Pharmchem is not doing any testing for paraquat now," he said. The CDC's testing procedure is somewhat more sophisticated, but not necessarily more correct than Pharmchem's. There were some false positives at Pharmchem, but the tests are as much art as science."

The test for presence of paraquat is delicate and demands a good eye to detect subtle color changes. The marijuana is placed in a sulfuric acid bath that reduces it to a gooey mass.

Extractions from the pot believed to contain paraquat are then exposed to a photographic plate.

"The solution will crawl up the plate," Gordon explained. "If it contains paraquat, it will leave colored lines on the plate."

Some laboratories around the country are still testing for paraquat, Gordon said. "Upfront, Inc., in Clearwater, Fla., has been finding no more than five percent of samples contain paraquat."

Most contaminated pot is grown in Mexico. The Mexican government has conducted a widespread spraying program with financial help and equipment from the United States.

The National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws asked a U.S. District Court last May for an injunction against the government's involvement in Mexican spraying activities.

The court ruled on June 8 that the government was in violation of the law by "failing to properly assess the environmental impact of spraying dangerous herbicides on marijuana fields in Mexico."

NORML's request for an injunction, however, was turned down. Judge Joseph Waddy cited "strong overtones of foreign policy" in refusing the injunction request.

Ken Stroup, NORML national director, called for a boycott against both Mexican travel and Mexican-grown products last summer.

"The Carter administration has demonstrated obvious moral confusion in this instance," Stroup said. "It is supporting a policy of marijuana decriminalization while poisoning marijuana smokers."

Colombian pot, on the other hand, supposedly does not contain paraquat, perhaps due to the relative tolerance of the Colombian government.

"I've never seen it written that spraying is going on in Colombia," Gordon said. "There's maybe some in Venezuela, but it's difficult to tell."



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