

Pot-Spraying Plan Raises Some Smoke

Florida's decision to spray marijuana fields with paraquat is under attack by an unlikely combination of opponents

Florida's campaign to wipe out its local marijuana crop with a chemical spray, paraquat, has brought about a curious reversal of roles for government and industry spokesmen. Chevron Chemical Company, which distributes paraquat, claims that its product was never intended for this purpose and may be too hazardous. The federal government and the state of Florida have decided that paraquat is safe, and they are telling the public that the risks of poisoning pot smokers are immeasurably small.

There is a third critical player in the game: the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML), a group that lobbies for the legalization of pot. NORML has threatened to haul everyone involved—Chevron, the governor of Florida, and the federal Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)—into court to prevent the spraying.

The controversy began in the mid-1970's when the DEA persuaded Mexico to attack its large, illicit marijuana crop with paraquat sprayed from the air. The United States supplied the funds and some of the paraquat. However, Mexican growers discovered they could salvage their crop if they moved quickly after the spraying and dragged the weed out of the sun. Thus, some tainted marijuana from Mexico turned up in the United States.

A panic ensued, fed by reports that small amounts of paraquat could do serious damage to pot smokers' lungs. NORML enjoined the paraquat program on the grounds that no environmental impact statement had been filed by the DEA. Congress intervened, cutting out appropriations for the Mexican spraying program in 1979. All was quiet for a time, but last year the ban on foreign use of paraquat was lifted. The DEA and several state governments hatched new plans for attacking marijuana.

Although the Mexicans have successfully wiped out their large marijuana fields, according to NORML, the pot industry is booming in the United States. Therefore, the DEA is focusing on domestic growers and on the one foreign source that has not curbed large-scale harvesting: Colombia. Colombian officials have indicated that they may be willing to use paraquat, but only after the

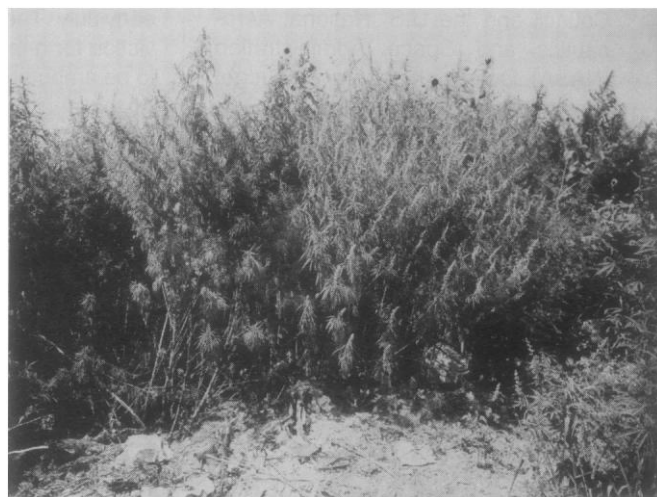
United States has used it on its own marijuana fields.

California, the largest marijuana producing state, has declined to use paraquat because it fears the spray could not be confined to marijuana fields alone. Florida, which has a suitable terrain and

leaves themselves are harvested. Analysis of Mexican marijuana has shown that a small amount of paraquat may get into smoke from tainted leaves.

The best summary of the health risks is given in an appendix to the *Marijuana and Health* report issued by the Institute

A candidate for paraquat



Drug Enforcement Administration

sufficient antidrug sentiment, decided this year to be the first to use paraquat on domestic marijuana.

Chevron is worried about bad publicity and legal actions. According to Chevron's spokesman, Abraham Wischnia, the Mexican campaign produced "a gigantic headache," involving the company in liability cases and boycotts of its products. So when the DEA recently encouraged states to use paraquat against domestic pot, Chevron wrote to the Justice Department in March saying that the company did not consider this an authorized use of its herbicide. "It's not that we think any harm would be done," Wischnia explains. "It's just that there are not sufficient data to say that this is a safe use." Although the Environmental Protection Agency gave its approval in February, Chevron says it still regards the use of paraquat on pot as illegal. Chevron has indicated that it would drop its resistance if the government agrees to indemnify the company against lawsuits.

Paraquat is a desiccant. It is used as a weed killer and also as a "pre-harvest aid." It is sprayed on soybeans, for example, to wither the leaves and expose the bean pods for easy mechanical collection. Marijuana is different in that the

of Medicine/National Academy of Sciences in February. The report says that no toxic effects attributable to paraquat have been found among marijuana smokers or harvesters. The data are "too meager" to support any conclusion about health risks. However, the report notes that "continued exposure to inhaled paraquat is likely to be harmful to the lungs," and that "if exposure is sufficiently intense over years, respiratory insufficiency, disability, and death may reasonably be expected to ensue."

Although Florida officials have taken the position that the hazards of paraquat are marginal when compared with the hazards of pot smoking itself, they have agreed to take some precautions, should the eradication program go forward. Spraying will be done from the ground at first and only on large, remote fields. After spraying, police will be dispatched to guard the withering plants until they have been dried beyond salvage. These measures, according to the governor, will ensure that none of the poisoned pot gets carried away.

This approach may be safe, but in Chevron's estimation it would be just as efficient to attack the problem "with a hoe and a bonfire."—ELIOT MARSHALL