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Big sorghum decisions on horizon

As they ring in the new year and prepare for their next growing season, sorghum producers will face two decisions that could dramatically affect their bottom line and the future of the industry.

Posted: December 16, 2010 - 12:13am

By Alyssa Dizon

AVALANCHE-JOURNAL

As they ring in the new year and prepare for their next growing season, sorghum producers will face two decisions that could dramatically affect their bottom line and the future of the industry.

First on the list is the referendum that will determine the continuation of the United Sorghum Checkoff Program — a self-help program where growers

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invest in the research and promotion enhancement of their commodity.

Second, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency launched a new evaluation of atrazine, which is one of the most commonly used herbicides around the world for sorghum, corn and sugarcane.

United Sorghum Checkoff Program referendum

During the USCP's board of directors meeting this week, the board reviewed the achievements in the two years of the program's existence, such as funding \$1.2 million in research projects. However, sorghum growers and importers hold the key to the program's future.

"I would say sorghum is probably the oldest neophyte commodity there is," said Wayne Cleveland, executive director of the Texas Grain Sorghum Producers Association. "It's been around forever and very little has been done with it."

Under the Commodity Promotion, Research and Information Act of 1996, an organization can collect funds from farmers on the production of a commodity for

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research, market development, communications and education. Within three years of the program's start of collections, producers must vote in a referendum.

The USCP referendum voting period runs through the entire month of February.

Cleveland said this gives growers time to see what USCP did in the last two years, and they must decide if it is profitable for them and worth investing in the long term.

Through market development research, growers' investment dollars opened doors to markets for food, feedstock and ethanol.

"Sorghum has some definite advantages with food that nobody's aware of," said Billy Bob Brown of the USCP board of directors.

Atrazine Re-evaluation

In October 2009, the EPA announced it was re-reviewing the effects of atrazine on human health to look at the latest research and ascertain if new restrictions should be made.

From February to September, the EPA presented and sought reviews from Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act Scientific Advisory Panel on EPA's laboratory studies on atrazine's effects on humans.

In 2011, EPA will have a peer review regarding the Agricultural Health Study findings on potential link between atrazine and cancer.

Tim Lust, CEO of National Sorghum Producers, believed atrazine was under fire again for health risk concerns because it has been around since 1958 and is widely used.

"After 6,000 studies I'm not concerned about the results of the science," Lust said. "Science has repeatedly proven time and time again that (atrazine) is an incredibly safe product."

In previous reviews by the advisory panel, it reported atrazine did not endanger public health or the environment.

Lust said the industry has worked with EPA for years on making improvements to management practices. However, if EPA prohibits atrazine use, producers will be left without an integral part of their operation.

Other chemicals may be effective on a few weeds or may complement atrazine, but there is no total replacement, he said.

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