

Phostoxin may replace strychnine for gophers

By Sean Pratt
Saskatoon newsroom

Gopher infested municipalities in southwestern Saskatchewan have their sights set on a solution to a lingering rodent problem that has spiraled out of control.

The Pest Management Regulatory Agency is running a pilot program to see if phostoxin, a gas used to kill grain beetles in wheat, could be the first viable replacement for liquid strychnine, which the PMRA banned in 1992.

David Marit, president of the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities, is keeping his fingers crossed that this may finally be the solution farmers have been seeking.

"We really hope it works," he said during an interview at SARM's convention in Saskatoon.

Marit said the size of gopher populations is astonishing in some municipalities in southwestern Saskatchewan.

"Until you see it, you can't believe it. You just can't."

He said a friend hired three sharpshooters to stand in the back of his pick-up truck, aiming to put a dent in the gopher horde that had invaded his pasture.

"They shot off 500 rounds and never moved the truck. Never moved it," said Marit.

The PMRA granted phostoxin a temporary registration in 2003 to control woodchucks and gophers, known formally as Richardson's ground squirrels. The product has proven successful under several different crop and soil types.

The PMRA is working with SARM and Saskatchewan Agriculture on a pilot program in which producers interested in using phostoxin are required to attend a one-day training course on how to safely use the product.

Courses have been held in Mankota and Shaunavon and three more are scheduled for Ogema, Kyle and Fox Valley. The first two attracted hundreds of hopeful farmers.

Marit said the process amounts to throwing phostoxin down a gopher hole and kicking in dirt after it.

"You don't even have to take your cattle out of the pasture," he said.

The pilot program in April and May will include field trials comparing phostoxin with two types of strychnine control—the banned two percent liquid concentrate and its 0.4 percent ready-to-use formulation replacement.

SARM has been lobbying the PMRA for a return of liquid strychnine, arguing that the less potent ready-to-use product is ineffective,

especially against the record number of gophers living in the Swift Current and Maple Creek regions.

"If (phostoxin) works, then strychnine can go away and the PMRA will be happy," said Marit.

He said the affordable product performed well in trials in Alberta last year and he is confident it will turn into much more than a "pilot" project in Saskatchewan.

"The (PMRA) can call it that, but I think it's going to be here and it's going to stay."

Phostoxin performed well in Alberta trials last year.

