

Update on the Methyl Bromide Phase Out

Bill Thomas, EPA, Washington, DC

Methyl bromide is used extensively on a global basis as a pesticide against nematodes, weeds, insects, fungi, bacteria, and rodents. As a soil fumigant, it is used in the production of strawberries, tomatoes, nursery crops, as well as other agriculture commodities. Grain, fresh fruit, forestry products, and other materials are fumigated with Methyl Bromide to control pest infestations during transport and storage. Structures are also treated with this chemical to control wood destroying insects and rodents.

However, methyl bromide has been identified as a significant ozone depleting substance, resulting in regulatory actions being taken by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and by the United Nations Environment Program (Montreal Protocol). Since this material will be unavailable soon, it is critical to identify and implement efficacious and viable alternatives in the near-term.

In October 1998, the U.S. Congress made specific changes to the Clean Air Act that will essentially "harmonize" the U.S. phase out of methyl bromide with the Montreal Protocol schedule for developed countries. EPA is now engaged in taking the necessary regulatory steps to implement these changes. The new methyl bromide schedule includes a 25% reduction from the 1991 baseline in 1999, a 50% reduction in 2001, a 70% reduction in 2003, and a 100% reduction in 2005. Preshipment and quarantine uses are exempt from the phase out, and critical agricultural uses will be allocated after 2005.

EPA is working with USDA and interested stakeholders in evaluating alternatives so as to focus scarce resources on those areas that will best assist growers move to alternatives in the short-term. To this end, EPA and USDA have cooperatively held meetings with stakeholders on to define where gaps exist in the range of available and viable alternatives. The next step in this effort will be necessary label and registration changes to chemical alternatives that may replace methyl bromide.