

● SKILLS

IDENTIFYING PESTICIDE INGREDIENTS USING AN MSDS

According to U.S. law, the label of a pesticide product identifies only certain pesticide ingredients. While the “active” ingredient(s) (those that kill or damage a pest¹) are identified on pesticide labels,² the law defines a class of ingredients³ (misleadingly called “inerts”) for which such identification is not required.² These inert ingredients, often making up most of the pesticide product, act as solvents, carriers, emulsifiers, and a long list of other functions.⁴ Knowing their identity is crucial in order to fully understand the hazards of a pesticide, but such information is not easy to obtain.

A good place to start is the “material safety data sheet” (MSDS) required by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.⁵ MSDSs are written for every pesticide product by the company that manufactures the product and are relatively easily available. While identification of all pesticide ingredients is *not* required on MSDSs,⁶ they sometimes identify some inert ingredients.

How Do I Get an MSDS?

If you are concerned about a pesticide that is being used by a commercial pest control operator or a public agency, start by asking the business or agency that is spraying to give you a copy of the MSDS. Many applicators and pesticide users are happy to provide you with one.

If such a request is not possible or the applicator is not cooperative, your first step should be to identify the name of the pesticide product that is being used. Again, many applicators and pesticide users will provide this information. An-



other way to get this information is from the product label, if the pesticide container is available. Get the complete name, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) registration number if possible, because the names of many pesticide products are similar.

Once the name of the pesticide in question is clear, there are a variety of approaches for finding an MSDS. If you have internet access, a good place to start is Crop Data Management Systems (CDMS; www.cdms.net). CDMS provides a large collection of current MSDSs (and labels) that can be easily downloaded. Their MSDS collection is organized by manufacturer, but searchable by product name. CDMS focuses mostly on agricultural pesticides, but a number of common residential and commercial products are included.

If your pesticide is not included in the CDMS collection, you will need to determine the manufacturer of your product. On the web, the information is available from EPA on a site maintained by the California Department of Pesticide

Regulation (www.cdpr.ca.gov/docs/epa/epamenu.htm). Using the database at this site you can enter either the product name or (preferably) the EPA registration number and obtain the name of the manufacturer. To get this same information by phone, call the National Pesticide Telecommunications Network (NPTN) at 1-800-858-7378. The name that a pesticide is sold under can be different than its registered name; if you have trouble, call NPTN. If you talk to NPTN, also ask them for the name of the active ingredient in the product and a tollfree number for the manufacturer.

Once you know the manufacturer of your pesticide, you can call them and request a fax or mailed MSDS. In addition, many major manufacturers offer downloadable MSDSs on their corporate websites. Unfortunately, manufacturers of consumer products do not always offer this service. Two that do are Solaris (including Ortho and Roundup brands) at www.ortho.com and Whitmire Micro-Gen at www.wmmg.com.

How Do I Find Ingredient Information on an MSDS?

Ingredient information is often included in one of the first sections of the MSDS. The active ingredients will almost always be listed. Any other ingredients listed are “inerts.” Sometimes inerts are identified elsewhere in the MSDS, so you may need to read carefully through the rest of the document.

Remember that the MSDS is written by the pesticide manufacturer and probably does not present information about all of the product’s hazards. If inert ingredients are identified, contact NCAP for help in determining what the hazards of the “inert” ingredients are. If your MSDS fails to identify any inerts, NCAP can also suggest some other approaches. Good luck!

—Caroline Cox

1. Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA) 2(a). (7 USC 136(a).)
2. FIFRA 2(n) and FIFRA 2(q). (7 USC 136(n) and (q)).
3. FIFRA 2(m) (7 USC 136(m).)
4. 40 CFR 180.1001.
5. 29 CFR 1910.1200 (g)(1).
6. 29 CFR 1910.1200 (g)(2).

Caroline Cox is JPR’s editor.