

## *Crop Dusters Face Increasing Resistance*

**F**ARMVILLE—Despite 20 years of experience, Wayne Slaughter sometimes wonders if he should have heeded his father's advice about his chosen profession. "I grew up on a farm," he says. "When I told my father I wanted to fly, he said, 'OK, as long as you don't become a crop duster.'"

Slaughter, who runs an aerial application business in Pitt County, is past president of the N.C. Agricultural Aviation Association. But he is concerned about the future of his profession, he says, because the state and federal governments have slipped an ever-tightening noose of regulations on aerial applicators. Yet he acknowledges that crop dusters have an image problem these days.

"When I first started, I sprayed a man's field and I saved it," Slaughter says. "I was a hero. Now, I'm doing the same thing and I'm wearing a black cap. I'm afraid that our environmentalist movement has done a lot working with people's emotions, rather than the facts."

The facts, according to Slaughter and other aerial applicators, are that North Carolina's regulations governing aerial spraying are among the most stringent in the nation. For instance, the state prohibits the drifting of any pesticides off targeted fields. Plus, the state bans spraying in 100 to 300-wide buffer zones around homes, schools, hospitals, and other occupied buildings.

**Wayne Slaughter, aerial applicator from Farmville**



Tom Mather

***A crop-duster pilot in Wyoming told me the life expectancy of a crop-duster pilot is five years. They fly too low. They hit buildings and power lines. They have no space to fly out of trouble, and no space to recover from a stall. We were in Cody, Wyoming, out on the North Fork of the Shoshone River. The crop duster had wakened me that morning flying over the ranch house and clearing my bedroom roof by half an inch. I saw the bolts on the wheel assembly a few feet from my face. He was spraying with pesticide the plain old grass. Over breakfast I asked him how long he had been dusting crops. 'Four years,' he said, and the figure stalled in the air between us for a moment. 'You know you're going to die at it someday,' he added. 'We all know it. We accept that; it's part of it.'***

—ANNIE DILLARD, *THE WRITING LIFE*

“There are tough regulations, and they enforce them,” says Slaughter, who has been cited twice for violating aerial regulations. “They’re not just adopting regulations that nobody follows. They’re enforcing them too.”

“We’re cutting back on chemicals. We’re only using exactly what is needed.”

State records show that aerial applicators had the highest violation rate among various categories of pesticide users from 1988 to 1992. The violation rate for aerial applicators was four times higher than the next highest user category, exterminators. (For a further discussion of violations by applicator types, see pp. 52–54 in the article, “Enforcement of Pesticide Regulations in North Carolina.”)

Aerial applicators say their high violation rate is due to their visibility and the large amounts of land they treat compared to other types of pesticide applicators. Pilots also blame public misconceptions about the dangers of pesticides. But if pesticides are so harmful to people’s health, they ask, then why aren’t more farmers and aerial applicators getting sick from using the chemicals?

“People forget that we live on these

farms,” Slaughter says. “We’re the first ones who drink the water, who eat those crops. If something was going wrong, we’d be the first ones to know it.”

“I’ve been in [aerial application] since 1974, and I’ve never been sick yet. Our national organization did a survey a few years ago, and that survey showed that the pilots, the ground crews, and their families were in much better health than the general public.”

Aerial applicators have another strong incentive to minimize their use of agricultural chemicals—their costs. “We’re using what we have to use,” Slaughter says. “These [chemicals] are too expensive for us to do things wastefully. A lot of people have the misconception that farmers are out spraying stuff all over. But you can’t just go out wasting chemicals. I have chemicals that cost over \$2,000 per five-gallon container.”

“I’m not saying we’re problem free. But I think we’ve done a darn good job straightening out our industry. Most of the complaints I get now are from people who just moved to the country and don’t know what I’m doing.”

—Tom Mather