

Woman Blames Husband's Death on Aerial Application

WAGRAM—Aerial application of pesticides is a risky business, and sometimes things go wrong. Perhaps the most serious problem is when winds or careless applications cause aerial pesticide sprays to land on people. Such incidents, although relatively infrequent,¹ can be traumatic for those involved—such as Jim and Faye Pickron.

Four years ago, the Pickrons settled in rural Scotland County with plans to retire there and raise goats for a living. But their plans have taken a tragic turn since the summer of 1992, when the Pickrons say they were doused with pesticides from an aerial applicator.

The Pickrons' home is about two miles outside Wagram, on a wooded lot bordered on two sides by a cotton field. A blue-and-white aircraft sprayed the field a number of times during July 1992, Faye Pickron says, with the drifting chemicals landing on four people on two different occasions. The first time, both Pickrons were sprayed while they were out in their yard. "Jim told me to go in the house and take a shower," she says. "But he went right on working." The second time, Jim Pickron and two workers were building a fence for a goat pen, and all three men were sprayed.

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Faye Pickron looks over the cotton field next to her yard, where she and her husband were sprayed by an aerial applicator.



Myron Dowell

Aerial

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Faye Pickron says the pesticide spray stung their skin and caused one of the workers to get sick to his stomach. Shortly after the incident, she says, their dog lost a litter of puppies and their goats started dying. Then, Jim Pickron started getting sick. Faye Pickron says her husband was in excellent health before he was sprayed by the pesticides. "He had a complete physical in June," she says. "Everything was fine, and then in August all these problems came up."

In August 1992, Jim Pickron's physician diagnosed his illness as lung cancer. He died from the cancer on Dec. 8, 1993. Faye Pickron blames the pesticide spraying for her husband's illness and death. "I think this spraying is what's killing a lot of people," she says. "I'll always believe it."

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—FAYE PICKRON OF WAGRAM
WOMAN SPRAYED BY AERIAL APPLICATOR

The N.C. Department of Agriculture identified the pilot as William Larry Upchurch of Owens Air Service in Raeford. Department investigators cited Upchurch for seven different violations, including operating "in a faulty, careless or negligent manner" and depositing pesticides within 100 feet of a residence. Investigators also found residues of the insecticide Ammo (cypermethrin) in vegetation samples from the Pickrons' yard and their goat pen. In June 1993, the N.C. Pesticide Board fined Upchurch \$2,000—the maximum allowed under North Carolina law for a pesticide violation. The board did not suspend his license.

Upchurch paid the fine, but says he never saw any people outside when he sprayed the cotton field next to the Pickrons' yard. "They were in the woods building a goat pen when they were sprayed," Upchurch says. "I couldn't see anybody."

Upchurch says he can sympathize with Faye Pickron's grief over her husband's death because his own father died of cancer about the same time. But he says there is no way his spraying could have caused Pickron's cancer or killed the goats.

"There were a lot of accusations that I don't think were justified," he says. "The whole thing was an accident. None of us in the aerial application business want to hurt anybody."

State records show that aerial applicators have the highest violation rate among various categories of pesticide users in North Carolina. The violation rate for aerial applicators was four times higher than the next highest user group (exterminators) from 1988 to 1992. (For more details on violations by applicator types, see the article, "Enforcement of Pesticide Regulations in North Carolina," on pp. 32-60. For a view of regulations from an aerial applicator's perspective, see "Crop Dusters Face Increasing Resistance," on pp. 44-45.)

Despite problems with some aerial applicators, state agriculture and health officials discount Faye Pickron's contention that the aerial spraying caused her husband's

cancer and killed their goats. Pickron also had smoked cigarettes for many years before quitting in the late 1980s.

"Linkages are being made that shouldn't be made," says Dr. Greg Smith, a physician with the state Division of Epidemiology. Smith, a member of the Pesticide Board, says that he can find no scientific evidence that Ammo (cypermethrin)—the pesticide reportedly sprayed on Pickron—causes cancer in people or animals. Plus, he says, adult lung cancer invariably takes many years to develop. "In conclusion, it is not biologically plausible that Mr. Pickron developed and died of lung cancer 18 months after his reported exposure to the pesticide Ammo," Dr. Smith says. "Without a doubt, his lung cancer began many years prior to [July 1992], the date of his reported exposure."²

The pesticide's effect on the Pickrons' goats also has been questioned. Cypermethrin has "low toxicity" for mammals and birds, according to laboratory tests conducted by FMC Corp., the manufacturer of Ammo. In addition, veterinarians with the Pembroke Veterinary Hospital in Robeson County and the Department of Agriculture's Rollins Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory in Raleigh examined five of the goats and found no evidence of pesticide poisoning. The veterinarians did find other health problems with the goats, including worms, pneumonia, mastitis, and encephalitis.

But Faye Pickron's brother, Harry Clark of Red Springs, who owned half of the goats on the Pickrons' property, is convinced that the pesticide sprays killed their goats and other animals. "I've been messing with goats for about 17 years," says Clark, who says the animals were healthy before the spraying started. "We had 110 goats," he says. "We lost 98 of them. One day, they would be walking around looking real healthy. Three days later, they'd be dead. We lost as many as seven goats in a day. We lost a whole litter of puppies—six of them—two days after he sprayed."

State agriculture officials say there is no doubt that Upchurch violated state regula-

tions limiting aerial applicators. But they could find no evidence tying the aerial drift to the deaths of Jim Pickron or his goats.

"It's obvious that Mr. Upchurch violated the regulations," says John Hunter of the N.C. Pesticide Section's enforcement staff. "There was chemical all over the property. What it did to the goats, I can't say. But whether Mr. Pickron got cancer from the spraying, I doubt it, especially since he was going to see the doctor about the time he was sprayed."

—Tom Mather

FOOTNOTES

¹The N.C. Center, in its review of enforcement records from the N.C. Department of Agriculture, identified 17 incidents in which drifting pesticide sprays landed on people—or 4.3 percent of the total cases from 1988 to 1992. These cases involved both ground and aerial applicators.

²As quoted from a letter from Greg Smith to the *Fayetteville Observer-Times*, dated April 27, 1994. Smith's letter was in response to an article by Michael Fabey, "He blamed his cancer on spray—until he died," *Fayetteville Observer-Times*, March 23, 1994, p. 1A.

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—W. LARRY UPCHURCH OF RAEFORD
PILOT FINED FOR SPRAYING
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