All change
Are you ready for the new metallic phosphide requirements?

The aim of RAMPS UK is to ensure the sustainable use of metallic phosphide products in all market sectors, through the training and certification of stockists and end users.

Change brings opportunity
Kevin Brown from RAMPS says: “It is a fact the purpose of the legislation coming from the Sustainable Use Directive is to restrict use to only those persons holding the appropriate certificate of competence. This will inevitably lead some parties to choose not to use gassing compounds and therefore to an increase in qualified contract work. There has already been some growth evident in the professional contractor sector.”

From 26 November 2015 all users of metallic phosphide products, such as Phostoxin and Talunex, must hold the new Level 2 Award. It’s the final element in an industry-led programme to ensure the continued availability of these useful, but potentially dangerous products. Richard Strand of the Pest Information Consultancy reviews how we got to where we are and asks, will users be trained and certificated in time?

In early 2003 undercover journalists for the consumer affairs series Rogue Traders targeted pest control with a programme highlighting the ease with which toxic products could be obtained by people who really didn’t understand their potential risks.

The programme concluded with a sequence where journalists set-up a spoof pest control company and following one phone call, purchased some aluminium phosphide. The various approval holders had met-up some years earlier to pull together data for product registration purposes. The screening of Rogue Traders was a catalyst in extending that alliance with a view to piecing together an effective product stewardship scheme for metallic phosphides used for vertebrate control.

Birth of RAMPS

The initial objective was to regulate the supply of the product. Criteria were set for the distributors of metallic phosphate-based products and a comprehensive list of distributors compiled. This list was then whittled-down with distributors opting to withdraw and the remainder being assessed by BASIS or by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society. Those that remained were placed on an approved list of suppliers and RAMPS (Register of Accredited Metallic Phosphide Suppliers, as it was then) was born.

But, regulating just one side of the supply chain can never deliver product stewardship on its own. Pressure was already mounting to restrict who could obtain the products. Anyone purchasing Schedule 2 poisons had to sign the Poisons Register, but such a signature was no warranty of competence. Untrained farmers, part- time pest controllers, office supplies clerks… or, indeed, a journalist posing as one of the above, could all turn up at their supplier merchant, spin a yarn and purchase the product.

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The Home Office was by this time expressing concerns that such a dangerous substance could be used for nefarious purposes. Although the more responsible suppliers were already beginning to request evidence of training from their customers, it quickly became apparent that ‘training’ came in a variety of shapes and sizes. Very often no attempt was made to assess the competence of the trainees at the end of these training days, trainees instead being...
Given a ‘certificate of attendance’.

Distributors pointed out that they had got their house in order and that now, spurred on by the legal requirements of the Sustainable Use Directive, it was the turn of users. So began the next stage in the process, which comes to a conclusion in November 2015 – just a few months away!

A decision was made that ALL users of metallic phosphide products would, by a certain date, have to be assessed and certificated as being competent. Easier said than done.

Standards had to be developed to define competence, these themselves had to be approved and registered. Training guidelines had to be written and instructors and assessors had to be identified and trained.

It is a testament to the single-mindedness and determination of those who comprised RAMPS (which now had evolved to full trade association status as the Register of Accredited Metallic Phosphide Standards – RAMPS UK) that such a task progressed surely to completion.

RAMPS was however spurred on by the Home Office, a representative of which sat in on many of the meetings and, very occasionally, when a stalemate on a particular aspect was looming, leaned forward with the words: “We can always withdraw the approval.”

Is the industry ready?

So with the span of a pregnancy to run, are we ready? Are the training and assessment teams in position in sufficient number and with an adequate geographical spread to ensure that all of those who need assessment will be able to obtain it? Does everyone who uses aluminium phosphide realise that if they do not act and act soon they will no longer be able to purchase and use the products after 26 November?

We have three Awarding organisations now able to offer assessment and certification – City & Guilds, Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) and, the latest addition from 1 April 2015, Lantra. All undertake assessment via a mix of written and oral questions and observation of treatments (albeit simulated) being undertaken. It’s important to point out that you don’t have to complete any training before being assessed and there is no set time after training by which the assessment must be completed.

Don’t leave it to the last minute

Dr Richard Burton at RSPH says: “We’ve been offering the qualification for a year now and so far more than 60 candidates have gone through assessment with about the same number so far booked onto future courses. We do urge pest controllers to book a course as soon as possible to ensure that they can obtain their certificate before the deadline.”

Karen Hobson heads-up the Boston-based, Lincolnshire Proficiency Tests Committee. Her organisation assesses for City & Guilds and has been carrying out assessments for three years now. Karen shares Richard Burton’s concern about candidates leaving things to the last minute, but is seeing numbers picking up significantly.

In 2013/14, 41 candidates went through assessment whilst for 2014/15, still with two months to run, 89 candidates have

Race against aluminium Phosphide

David Cross, chairman of RAMPS UK says: “The clock is ticking in the race to meet the new aluminium phosphide legal requirements for user certification. A large number of candidates are already taking the course and numbers are growing. But, as the deadline nears demand is likely to exceed supply, so I would urge people who will be affected to act soon.”

Purchasing controls

We asked RAMPS what has been done to stop product getting into the wrong hands. Kevin Brawn from RAMPS UK welcomed the question.

“It’s a good point and one that’s often forgotten,” he said. “These new regulations in no way undermine our existing laws. The Plant Protection (Sustainable Use) Regulations control the ‘use’ of aluminium phosphide, but the sale is still covered by the existing Poisons Act 1972 and the Poison Rules 1982.

“These require vetted companies, approved by their local authority, to follow certain protocols, including ensuring that the person buying the product is known to them, known to be a professional, using the product for professional purposes and providing evidence of such by signing the Poisons Register.

“The Poison Rules also specify that the product, when delivered, should be signed for by the person purchasing it.”

“This documentation has now been updated and, in particular, there is a newly designed Poisons Book which records both the user’s certification number and the new individual numbers of the flasks purchased. Another addition has been to add a reference to the delivery note to make cross-referencing that much easier.

“Finally, this year distributors will be taking a stockist qualification specific to aluminium phosphide.”
been assessed, with at least 20 more already booked for assessment before the year end. Karen observes that this brisk turnover is in large part due to an active group of training providers throughout the county and with courses booked to capacity.

In any new scheme there is a concern that new requirements will be ignored by some, either through ignorance or quite deliberately. Some will attempt to carry on using the product after November 2015, with or without the certificate. They will look to work from a stockpile or by getting others to buy products for them. Product stewardship is one thing but how is plain misuse going to be policed?

**What are metallic phosphides?**

The products covered by RAMPS are aluminium phosphide, a vertebrate control and grain/commodity fumigant and magnesium phosphide, a grain/commodity fumigant.

The active substance is phosphine, a highly toxic colourless, tasteless and odourless gas. When aluminium phosphide pellets are applied, they react with water vapour in the environment to generate phosphine gas. Impurities associated with this reaction give it a strong garlic smell. Phosphine is the most toxic substance approved for pest control in the UK.

Lack of alternatives, especially for rabbits and moles, has led to an increased reliance on aluminium phosphide. It is also the only non-anticoagulant poison for the control of rats.

Government has made it clear that ensuring that the product is used, stored and disposed of correctly is the only way to ensure its long-term future availability.

After November only certificated users and companies employing them (evidence may be required) will be able to purchase metallic phosphide products and/or collect the products from the supplier. It is anticipated that RAMPS initial registration of distributors will make supply rules secure. But, where there is a will there is a way. Could the uncertificated seek to gain a supply from certificated users as a favour or for profit? It is hoped not!

Rentokil’s David Cross, chairman of RAMPS UK emphasises that the import of approved products into the UK is strictly controlled and reminds us that the import of any other formulations that do not have an approval is illegal.

**Full product traceability**

In the case of supplies sold in the UK, Mr Cross explains: “Each flask of tablets or pellets is now individually coded and its sale logged. If a flask turns up in an incident it will be traceable back to the person who purchased it.” He goes on to say: “Policing will be undertaken by Natural England (Scottish Natural Heritage, Natural Resources Wales, Northern Ireland Environment Agency) on behalf of HSE. Misuse is a criminal offence with those found guilty incurring a fine and a criminal record.”

This is fine for the UK but, increasingly, we live in a world of international commerce. Will the enterprising operator get around the sales restrictions by buying online? A quick search on the two obvious websites, eBay and Amazon, happily revealed a blank. Looking further afield it is possible to buy unfamiliar (unapproved) aluminium phosphide products from outside Europe. Most advertisers require a minimum order of one tonne, or more, so this route is unlikely to prove of interest.

On a more positive note, could the tightening of regulation provide new business opportunities for those prepared to get themselves certificated? One outcome already observable is that potential users are weighing up the commitment now required and deciding that it is not for them. No doubt a number of farmers and gamekeepers are considering the commitment now required and deciding that it is not for them.

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How to get certificated?

To obtain the necessary Level 2 Award in the Safe Use of Aluminium Phosphide for Vertebrate Pest Control there are two main routes you can follow. There is a one-day training course followed by a separate 2 to 2.5 hours assessment, or a two day course which incorporates the exam/assessment. Or you can, if you wish, just take the assessment.

For the one-day training course expect to pay £120 to £150, with a further £80 to £100 for the assessment plus there is a fee payable to the awarding body (City & Guilds) of £30.

The two-day all-in option will cost in the region of £250 to £300 including the assessment fee paid to RSPH.

The RAMPS website displays a list of trainers, but most of these individuals will not be organising training days, just tutoring on them. The key training providers for our sector on the RAMPS site are:

- Barrettine
- Killgerm
- PestTrain
- Russell IPM
- Penybont Training Group
- Martin Glenn
- Pest Solution Ltd
- Talunex.co.uk (HFM Ltd)
- SX Environmental

The RSPH website has a very useful ‘Find a centre’ search facility. Go to: www.rspb.org.uk/en/qualifications/centre-search/

You can find out more about the new Lantra Awards course at www.lantra-awards.co.uk/

Storage, transport & disposal

The way these products are stored, transported and disposed of is equally important to the way they are used. People have died as a result of poor storage; both at fixed stores and during transit.

Separate storage cabinets made of metal, or other fire resistant material, are essential, as is clear labelling (see sign above) and a vapour-proof barrier between product and people when transporting.

Natural England’s Paul Butt has plenty of horror stories when it comes to the storage, transport and disposal of aluminium phosphide. He emphasises that the scenarios, pictured below, are just examples of the sort of cases he has come across all too frequently. People who treat these products with little respect are endangering themselves, their families, their neighbours and passers-by, no wonder anyone who uses them is now being asked to prove their competence!

1 Shows full fumigant flasks that had been dumped on the edge of a forest in a plastic bag. The product was safely retrieved and disposed of by the supplier.

2 Is of a part-used flask discovered in a vehicle glove box!

3 Shows flasks being stored in an unsigned, wooden shed, in an area of domestic housing.

4 Is an eBay case where the fumigant was being offered for sale – full and part-used flasks were being kept in an unlocked, wooden shed with no warning signs. In a joint police and Natural England operation the material was seized and safely disposed of. Prosecution produced a guilty plea.