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Athens Tech program will fix bugs in pesticide licensing process

By Lee Shearer | lee.shearer@onlineathens.com | Story updated at 11:27 PM on Saturday, March 10, 2007

A new way of testing pesticide applicators developed at Athens Technical College promises to save money for people and companies in Georgia's pesticide application industry and could become a model for similar testing programs in Georgia and other states.

People who apply pesticides in homes, on golf courses even on farm fields from airplanes must be licensed by the state

- and to get a license, they must pass a test.

In the past, most had to drive to Atlanta to take the test. Then they might have to wait three to five days to find out whether they passed or failed.

But with the system developed by Athens Tech workers, test-takers will be able to drive to their nearest technical college campus to take the test. So far seven campuses have signed on to become testing centers, and the number is expected to grow to 21, said Jason Ritchie, special projects web developer for Athens Tech.

Test-takers not only will be able to take the license tests closer to home, they also will know whether they've passed as soon as they take the test, Ritchie said.

And those who don't pass will get more than a simple pass or fail grade.

The computerized system also will tell the test-takers what areas they need to bone up on before attempting the test

again, said Ritchie, who developed the system with Dennis Ashworth, Athens Tech vice president for information technology.

Thousands of people take pesticide licensing tests every year, said state Agriculture Commissioner Tommy Irvin, whose office regulates pesticide applicators.

"In the past, if you wanted to apply for a license, you had to come to Atlanta.

Any time you can move out in the state is

a blessing to the general public," Irvin said.

Irvin predicted other states soon would adopt the Athens Tech system.

"That program may end up being a model for the nation," he said.

The Georgia General Assembly last year appropriated more than \$200,000 to develop the program. But the ongoing

operating costs will be covered by fees charged to test-takers, Irvin said.

The state Department of Agriculture administers tests for more than a dozen different kinds of specialties or levels of expertise within the pesticide application field.

Some tests already are being administered with the computer-based system, but as the state continues the switchover to computer testing, some paper-and-pencil tests will continue through June, Irvin said.

Athens Tech President Flora Tydings said the new testing system also may be a model for other Georgia state agencies

that administer licensing or other kinds of testing.

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Athens Tech also will develop training materials to be used with the testing system, Tydings said.

The college already has developed a similar computer-based system of training materials and testing for the state

Department of Family and Children Services, she said.

"It's a huge advancement," said Kelly Hackney, executive director of the Certified Pest Control Operators Association of Georgia, a trade organization representing companies that treat buildings with pesticides.

The program could save millions of dollars annually for the pest control industry, said Andrea Daniel, executive director of community and college relations for Athens Technical College. Tydings said the college began working on the project after Jack Spivey, an Elbert County pesticide company owner, approached officials with the idea.

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