

Winnipeg Free Press - PRINT EDITION

## Pesticide bans do backfire

Get ready for more yellows, browns . . . and plastic on the ground

By: Maclean's

Posted: 1:00 AM | Comments: 0 (including replies)



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*In this photo taken March 29, 2011, weeds grow on the football field at Sparkman High School in Sparkman, Ark. In an effort to save their dying town and school system, residents in Sparkman are banding together to send their high school graduates to college. (AP Photo/Danny Johnston)*

With winter quickly fading to a distant memory, homeowners are eagerly turning their minds to gardens and lawn care. Unfortunately, the Manitoba government has plans to make these jobs a lot more difficult.

In February, Conservation Minister Gord Mackintosh promised some sort of pesticide ban for the province. He said he wants to bring Manitoba's laws in line with those in other jurisdictions. "Manitobans are entitled to the same protections most other Canadians enjoy," he declared. Yet Manitobans might want to learn from the experience of those other provinces, rather than simply parrot them. Evidence from other jurisdictions suggests there are numerous unintended consequences to a pesticide ban. And not all of them make for a healthier environment.

Currently every province east of the Manitoba-Ontario border restricts the use of cosmetic pesticides in some way. Mackintosh says he admires the strict bans enforced in Ontario and Nova Scotia. These rules prohibit use of a long list of pesticides on all lawns and fields. Golf courses and farms are exempt.

Of course every one of these banned pesticides has been certified as safe for residential use by Ottawa's Pest Management Regulatory Agency. PMRA scientists perform rigorous evaluations of all pesticides and when they conclude, for example, that the popular and effective herbicide 2,4-D "meets Canada's strict health and safety standards" this verdict carries the weight of exhaustive investigation.

Bans, encouraged by lobby groups ranging from family physicians to environmentalists, rest not on competing scientific evidence, but rather a vague unease about chemicals in general.

As such, provincial pesticide bans represent a triumph of sentiment over science. But does this sort of regulation provide a net benefit to society? The experience of other jurisdictions can be revealing.

After two years without pesticides in Ontario, the evidence is starkly visible: mostly browns and yellows. There's little debate that the province looks shabbier and weedier now. Parks, sports fields and lawns have become wholly infested with dandelions and a variety of other weeds and there's no practical way to remove them, other than hand-pulling. Whether this is a good or bad thing may depend on your definition of beauty – not to mention the condition of your back and knees. A recent poll found a majority of Ontario homeowners want to end the ban.

But what of other health impacts arising from a pesticide ban? In Chicago, the suburban municipality of Highland Park regularly won awards for the quality of its sports fields. Then four years ago it dropped pesticides for trendy organic pest control. The result was a disaster. In some parks weeds accounted for more than 60 per cent of the ground cover. Many fields were unusable for sports. "The fields are getting worse every year," parks commissioner Cal Bernstein told the Chicago Sun-Times. "Something needs to be done to reverse the trend." In November, the district approved the return of pesticides.

And while pesticide bans are frequently defended by advocates as a way to reduce unknown risks and promote a more natural environment, in fact the opposite may be true.

to more than 100 this year. For Rob Witherspoon, director of the University of Guelph's Turfgrass Institute, the reason for the switch from natural to ersatz is obvious. "Without pesticides it has become a lot more challenging to maintain a natural turf sports field," he observes.

Artificial turf fields boast plenty of advantages, despite their average \$1-million upfront installation cost. A typical artificial field can provide up to four times the usable playing hours as compared to natural grass, since real turf requires frequent rests and considerable expertise to maintain. Nonetheless, it seems ironic a pesticide ban meant to encourage a greener environment will result in a greater prevalence of plastic sports fields. (Not to mention the issue of how to dispose of an artificial field once its lifespan ends.)

Other real risks have also been overlooked in the unscientific panic about pesticides. Witherspoon notes that grass is not only a natural filter, but also a microbiological system that consumes any bodily fluids leaked, spat or vomited onto it. Not so with an artificial field. In the absence of a cleansing downpour, what's on the field stays on the field.

Texas, with a hot, dry climate that favours artificial turf fields, has reported a rate of staph infections among high school students many times the national average. In 2007, Texas footballer Boone Baker almost died from a deadly methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) infection he picked up from his high school's artificial turf. Regular disinfection of artificial fields using industrial-strength chemical products is now a recommended maintenance procedure in all climates.

When it comes to pesticides, Manitoba can learn a lot from the experience of those who've gone before. If the goal is to reduce verifiable risks, promote a more natural environment and encourage healthy activities, banning pesticides seems a strange way to go about it.

This is a slightly altered version of an editorial written by Peter Taylor for the March 12 edition of Maclean's magazine.

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