

Pesticides in Canada are safe to use

A provincewide ban on all products is not justified because strict regulations based on scientific research already protect our health

BY LORNE HEPWORTH, VANCOUVER SUN JULY 13, 2011 1:18 AM



Many British Columbians choose to use pesticides for pest management. Health Canada carefully reviews all scientific evidence and studies before these products can be approved for Hepworth writes.

Photograph by: Glenn Baglo, Vancouver Sun, Vancouver Sun

If history has taught us anything, it's that important decisions should never be based on emotion. That's all the more true when it comes to significant public policy decisions made by governments. Think about it. How many times have we seen politicians make decisions based on polling in an effort to boost their own popularity without giving proper thought or consideration to the facts or impact of that decision? Far too many to list.

Yet, in a recent opinion piece, the Canadian Cancer Society and the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE) argue for exactly this type of failed approach by advocating for a provincewide ban of pesticides because some polling suggests that people would support such a move. Whether that's true or not, surely we can all agree that facts and science should guide regulation of pesticides.

Unfortunately those advocating a ban disagree because in this case, the facts are not on their side. And when the facts don't support their position, activists prefer to ignore them. But here's the reality: Pesticides are currently one of the most regulated products you will ever come across. Before any pesticide can be sold in Canada it must undergo an exhaustive and comprehensive scientific review and safety assessment by Health Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency, which is mandated to ensure the protection of human health and the environment. Utilizing the strictest health and safety standards anywhere in the world, Health Canada carefully reviews all scientific evidence and studies before a pesticide product may be approved for sale and use.

Recognizing the need to continue to lead in the protection of human health, the federal government reviewed and updated pesticide legislation in 2006, providing Canadians with the strongest protection on a global scale. Specifically, pesticides undergo more than 200 separate tests addressing every possible health and environmental issue imaginable. Virtually no other consumer product has been subject to the same level of scientific scrutiny and regulatory oversight as pesticides.

In their opinion piece, the Canadian Cancer Society and CAPE name the most common weed control product 2, 4-D as warranting particular concern. What they neglect to say is that in May 2008, Health Canada released the findings of an extensive review of 2, 4-D that considered all potential environmental and health impacts -including special considerations for children, pregnant women and the elderly -and found no evidence to support allegations that 2, 4-D is harmful to our health. In fact, Health Canada concluded Canadians can continue to use the product and stated, "risks to homeowners and their children from contact with treated lawns and turf are not of concern." The exact same position was also taken by regulatory agencies in the European Union, the United States and the World Health Organization.

In making their argument, these two groups advocate the use of so-called "natural" products. However, what they don't mention is that Health Canada recognizes that "natural" does not equal safe and, as a result, all pesticides -regardless of whether they are natural or synthetic -are subject to the same scrutiny. While the marketing of "natural" pest control products may make them popular, it is not scientifically sound.

So why do these groups persist in their misinformation campaign?

The CBC's Marketplace recently analyzed the national Canadian Cancer Society's financial reports going back 12 years. They discovered that the Society's spending on research has dropped dramatically, from 40.3 per cent in 2000 to under 22 per cent in 2011, while its spending on administration and fundraising has substantially increased from 26 per cent of all monies raised in 2000 to 42.7 per cent in 2011.

While the CBC profile dealt specifically with the national Canadian Cancer Society, the B.C. and Yukon division's financial records show a similar trend of decreased spending on research (down \$1.5 million in 2010 from 2005) with a corresponding increase in expenditures on revenue development.

By loudly championing causes such as this and focusing a large portion of donors' funds on lobbying efforts, are the Canadian Cancer Society (nationally and provincially) and CAPE using the pesticides issue to raise their profiles and increase their revenues? While they are free to make that choice, it doesn't grant them the authority to decide which products consumers may use without any scientific proof or evidence.

Regardless of their motivation, the facts remain. A large proportion of British Columbians choose to use pesticides as part of their personal pest management tools. Health Canada has found these tools to be safe for use by individuals and so the ability to employ them should not be limited based on the unscientific, polling arguments by organizations seeking to raise more money. Decisions such as these should continue to be made on the basis of sound science, thorough research and comprehensive evaluation by the scientific professionals we all depend on to keep us safe.

Lorne Hepworth is president of CropLife Canada, the trade association representing manufacturers, developers and distributors of pesticides, including those designed specifically for urban use.

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