

## INSIDERS: Health professionals applaud fast-track for Ontario pesticide ban

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### If as extensive as hoped, ban could be the most health-protective in North America

In mid-January I chaired a meeting between leading medical and environment groups and Ontario Environment Minister John Gerretsen. We gathered to show the minister the province's health professionals were united in supporting the government's proposed ban on lawn and garden pesticides. Included in our meeting were the heads of the Ontario College of Family Physicians and the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario, along with representatives from the Canadian Cancer Society (Ontario Division), the David Suzuki Foundation and the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment. All told, we spoke on behalf of literally tens of thousands of doctors and nurses.

We presented the minister with a five-point statement outlining what we'd like to see in the pesticide legislation, noting that toxic lawn chemicals are linked to a variety of serious medical conditions, including cancer, birth defects and neurological illness. The statement was signed by all the groups attending the meeting as well as a host of other organizations, including the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario and the Ontario Medical Association (Section on Pediatrics).

Each of these groups had previously worked on the issue on its own, but the new twist was their collaboration: Fifteen of Ontario's highest-profile health and environment organizations jointly called for action. The days of a handful of activists struggling to be heard were over; this was an outpouring of support from the medical mainstream. The minister remarked it was one of the most impressive coalitions he had seen in his many years of public life.

He went on to say he will introduce the legislation for the ban this spring, with the potential for final passage in the fall. We knew the government was concerned about these chemicals but had no idea they were looking to enact legislation within the next several months. (Contrast this with Ottawa's climate change initiative—which is scheduled to be fully implemented by the year 2050.) The fact the ban will be among the first bills introduced in the new sitting is a measure of its importance, both to the government and to Ontarians—71% of whom support province-wide pesticide restrictions, according to a 2007 Oracle poll.

In our meeting with the minister, we stressed we were seeking legislation banning not only pesticides' use but also their sale. While use restrictions—such as those in Toronto, London and Peterborough—are crucially important, the province has the power to go beyond this and provide even more protection by preventing anyone from purchasing these poisons.

The new legislation could be ground-breaking. While Quebec has a prohibition that outlaws most lawn chemicals, a number of dangerous formulations are still permitted. The Ontario legislation could go further, banning any toxic product whose only purpose is changing a lawn's appearance. Experts at the Canadian Environmental Law Association tell me Ontario's ban could be the most health-protective in North America.

Are pesticide prohibitions truly effective? Quebec's has been. According to Statistics Canada, restrictions in that province resulted in an impressive 50% drop in household pesticide use between 1994 and 2006. And, of course, when these toxins are less prevalent in society, fewer people have them in their bodies. Research from Quebec's National Institute of Public Health found children living in municipalities with a ban had no detectable levels of lawn herbicides—a wonderful finding and one we hope to repeat, on an even larger scale, in the province of Ontario.

*Gideon Forman is executive director of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment ([www.cape.ca](http://www.cape.ca)).*

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