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Pesticide ban a win-win situation

Published: August 09, 2011 6:00 PM

Premier Christy Clark and Opposition leader Adrian Dix are to be commended for supporting a province-wide ban on the sale and use of lawn and garden pesticides. Not only will this legislation be hugely popular, it will also have a very positive effect on the health of B.C.'s people, environment, and economy. How can we be sure? Because we've seen what happens when pesticide regulations are passed in other provinces.



The first result, not surprisingly, is a very low pesticide usage rate. Quebec's pesticide ban started to take effect in April, 2003. By 2007, chemical pesticides were being used by just four per cent of households with a lawn or garden. By contrast, in B.C. – which lacks a province-wide ban – the figure was 25 per cent.

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When pesticides are taken off store shelves, people are no longer exposed to lawn chemicals which can cause very serious medical problems. The Ontario College of Family Physicians tells us pesticides are associated with brain cancer, prostate cancer, kidney cancer, and pancreatic cancer. The College makes a point of saying some children exposed to pesticides have an increased risk of leukemia, especially if they come into contact with "insecticides and herbicides used on lawns, fruit trees and gardens..."

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The Ontario ban is also improving water quality. The provincial Ministry of Environment studied pesticide concentrations in 10 urban streams before and after their ban came into effect (2008 versus 2009) and compared the findings. The study's author states: "Concentrations of 2,4-D, dicamba, MCPP, total phenoxy herbicides and total insecticides were significantly lower in 2009..." In fact, in some streams pesticide concentrations were up to 97 per cent lower. That's an extraordinary result and suggests a province-wide pesticide ban in B.C. would have similar benefits.

The Ontario ban has also been well-received by lawn-care businesses. The firm Environmental Factor – which makes a non-toxic corn-gluten-based weed inhibitor – had a 400 per cent increase in sales and manufacturing in the ban's first six months. Product demand was so great the company had to move to larger premises. Other Ontario firms said they viewed the new legislation as an opportunity for business growth and new hiring. (Organic lawn care, which includes hand-weeding, is more labour-intensive.)

But what about B.C.? Polling done in the province by Innovative Research Group and released in February, 2011 found support for a phase-out of "cosmetic" or non-essential pesticides was over 70 per cent. The research also found 72 per cent of British Columbians believe these pesticides pose a threat to the environment and nearly 70 per cent believe they threaten children. Perhaps most significantly, the study found support for the phase-out does not differ between rural and urban areas. The message for government couldn't be clearer: No matter where they live in the province, the vast majority of British Columbians want an end to toxic lawn products.

We would suggest B.C. model its ban on Ontario's excellent Cosmetic Pesticides Ban Act but go one step further: in addition to lawns and gardens, extend the restrictions to golf-courses. The latter are increasingly maintained without poisons, a trend that legislation would only strengthen.

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We would urge British Columbians to email the Premier (premier@gov.bc.ca) today with one simple message: "This summer, give us the protection from pesticides already enjoyed by millions of other Canadians."

- This is an edited version of the original op-ed piece.

Gideon Forman is Executive Director of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment.

Dr. Warren Bell is Past Founding President of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment.

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This article should be widely read. It is high time in B.C. and elsewhere to reduce this unnecessary health hazard. The Ontario ban has made a big difference, especially to people with environmental sensitivities. Children breathe a much cleaner air and water bodies' pollution has been substantially diminished. Moreover, how wonderful it is to walk your pet on a suburban street, in the knowledge that he or she is safe from exposure to toxic chemicals! (I nearly lost my dog in 2002 when she was dermally exposed to the commonly used, but largely untested PAR III, a combination of three herbicides, in my condominium area.)

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