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Pesticide 'junk science' challenge

By Terry Davidson, Toronto Sun
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Progressive Conservative MPP Ted Chudleigh argues there is little scientific proof that using pesticides can lead to serious long term health problems.

TORONTO - You win some you lose some.

Progressive Conservative MPP Ted Chudleigh is disappointed his private member's bill aimed at loosening the rules around Ontario's controversial cosmetic pesticide ban was defeated at Queens Park on Thursday.

That doesn't mean he won't fight on.

Chudleigh knows the ban is a polemic subject and will now push for the PC party to make it an election issue. He told the Toronto Sun on Friday that the bill was a reflection of what many homeowners have been asking themselves since pesticides were banned by Ontario's Liberal government in 2009: Just how hazardous are pesticides to human health, and does it warrant such sweeping prohibition on using them?

Like many others, Chudleigh believes the report that prompted the ban - a 2004 Ontario College of Family Physicians study that found "consistent links" between pesticide use and cancer, neurological impairment and birth problems - is based on "junk science."

He argues there is little scientific proof that using pesticides can lead to such health problems.

"It is frustrating that good science has been conquered by junk science," said Chudleigh, whose private member's bill would have amended the Pesticides Act to allow lawn-care professionals to apply some currently-banned pesticides to lawns and gardens. "The physicians ... I don't think their area of expertise extends to the use of pesticides. I'd like a doctor to look after me in his office, not on my lawn."

Chudleigh is far from alone in his criticism of the OCFP report, a study based on the compilation of other research papers examining pesticide use and health.

Shortly after its release, the United Kingdom's Advisory Panel on Pesticides, a governmental regulatory body, cited "serious flaws" with the OCFP report. It cited points such as "failure" to take into account studies with results running contrary to OCFP findings, and examining pesticide exposure in agricultural areas - where pesticides are allowed, and regularly used - instead of domestic, urban areas.

As well, Health Canada stated that the "OCFP report is a review of epidemiology studies selected from the public scientific literature," and that it lacked sufficient scientific data. And the Canadian Institutes of Health Research issued its own reaction to the OCFP study, stating that "more ... well-designed studies that provide reliable and valid exposure measures" were needed.

Ontario's pesticide ban is not based on science, but on a political agenda, says Pierre Petelle, vice-president of chemistry for Crop Life Canada,

"This was an ideological, politically-motivated decision that played on people's fears and lack of scientific knowledge," said Petelle. He pointed to a recent poll that found 78% of Ontarians feel the current legal methods of weed and insect control are inadequate, and that almost half believe commercial pesticides are safe provided directions are followed.

"The consequences are coming to light in the urban sector, on homeowners' properties, sports fields and municipal areas," said Petelle, adding that the OCFP study neglected to look at toxicology data to back up its findings. "Even Health Canada ... looked at this study and said there was nothing in (it) that warranted further regulatory action, that it was a selective gathering of studies and that it didn't represent the body of scientific evidence they rely on."

Ontario is not the only province where there is debate around pesticide use: British Columbia Premier Christie Clark has been hankering for a ban there, but an all-party committee on pesticides said in May that, after considering more than 8,000 submissions, there lacks enough scientific evidence to warrant a ban, and instead made 17 recommendations around tightening rules around pesticide use and educating the public.

Dr. Cathy Vakil, who helped pen the OCFP report, disagrees with those who say her paper lacks scientific weight. She says the authors took a "systematic approach" and searched "enormous databases" to find "peer-reviewed" collections of studies,

"It was ... pretty well the gold standard of any kind of review you can have," said Vakil, who vehemently disagreed that OCFP excluded studies with conclusions running contrary to the use of pesticides being hazardous. "It is computer-driven. You plug in the key words, and it spews out ... collections of studies in a completely unbiased way."

Gideon Forman of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment, is adamant the science behind the OCFP report is strong.

"But let's say it wasn't," he said. "Why would you want to take the risk? Why would you take that risk, when the only thing you are changing is the appearance of your lawn?"

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