

Cut the farmer some slack in the debate over pesticides

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Commentary

Hardly a day goes by without seeing a cry in the media on how the farming industry on P.E.I. is poisoning Islanders with tons of pesticides. In her letter ('Pathway of poison is expensive') Sandra Boswell warns of the poisons governments allow people to put on their lawns and fields. She mentions side effects: "anorexia, vomiting, muscle weakness, slowed heart rate, etc." This is true, and more debate needs to take place on the use and misuse of pesticides.

Fear-mongering is not the way to do it, though. People are writing letters, posting on Facebook and other places dire warnings about P.E.I. being unsafe for human beings. A recent post on Facebook said we should ban all pesticides. Period. He said tourists won't come here because intelligent people know we use pesticides (you mean no other farming areas in North America use pesticides?) Green Party leader, Sharon Labchuk, is running against Environment Minister Richard Brown to make her point. F. Ben Rodgers of Ebenezer said in a letter "We have to ban all types of toxic sprays, whether it be farming, golf courses or private lawns."

OK, let's do that. Lawns and golf courses aside, that leaves farming. No more insecticides to kill potato beetles or corn borer. No more herbicides to kill weeds in the soybeans, barley and other grain crops. No more fungicides to stop potato blight. That was the cause of the Irish potato famine that killed one million people in 1840. How long would it take blight to kill all North America's potato crop? A year?

Weed and insect infestation in other crops would reduce yields easily by 75-90 per cent. Are you willing to line up in grocery stores to buy a loaf of bread for \$40-\$50? Or \$50 for a bag of vegetables, if you can get them at all? Don't think it can't happen?

Part of the problem is ignorance on the part of many people who are jumping on the 'ban pesticide' wagon without knowing what they are talking about. Some of them don't want a ban on cosmetic pesticides because 'I need to put fertilizer on my lawn'. Fertilizer is plant food, not a pesticide. Or 'I'm talking about herbicide, not pesticide'. All forms come under the term pesticide (herbicide, insecticide, fungicide, etc.). Perhaps they should do a little homework before screaming to the media.

And maybe we should take a look in the mirror first. Who do you suppose forced the farmer into using all those chemicals? We did. The consumer. We want food so cheap that we stopped shopping at the little corner store that bought from the little market gardener. We went to the big shiny grocery stores that spend more money on dazzling you with flashy displays than they pay the producers.

To remain competitive, the farmer had to get bigger. He needed bigger farms, then bigger equipment to plant and harvest the crops, just to make a little profit. Then those shiny big grocery stores said "Wait a minute, we need to make more money. Now we will pay you 10 per cent less for your meat and produce." The farmer has to find a way to get bigger yields yet again, so he applies more fertilizer (much of it in nitrate form) and more chemicals to make sure he squeezes every ounce of yield out of those tired fields. All to make that same little profit that most of us would walk away from.

Now the fields and farmers are at a breaking point. They want to go organic, but know it will be years (perhaps decades) before they can get good yields on a scale that Joe Consumer can still get a 10-pound bag of potatoes for two bucks. Something is going to give, and unfortunately it is likely going to be the farmers that helped form this country, not the greedy consumers who want that one-dollar loaf of bread while they point their fingers at those nasty poison-using farmers.

Do any of you honestly think farmers want to use dangerous, costly pesticides if they don't have to? You think the chemicals are hazardous when being sprayed on a field. Try handling them full strength as they dilute them and add them to the sprayer tanks. I'll bet most farmers' blood pressure goes through the roof when they unscrew the cap on a bottle of insecticide. I know mine always did when I used them in my job.

So maybe we should cut the farmer a little slack. Take that pointing finger out of the farmer's face and use it to shake his hand. If you worked day and night all year long and made just enough money to get the banker off your back until next cropping season, you'd probably walk away after a year or two. Do our farmers? No. Why not? I have no idea, but thank God they don't walk away. You worry about food being grown here? What happens if all our farmers walk away and suddenly all your food comes from 'offshore'? Then you'll really have something to worry about.

Lloyd Kerry of Charlottetown is an agricultural research technician, and for 20 years was required to use agricultural chemicals.