

District agrees to pesticide ban



Sage and Sierra Shaw, both Beirsto students, are happy with the Vernon School District's decision to ban the use of cosmetic pesticides on all school grounds.

photo submitted

By [Katherine Mortimer - Vernon Morning Star](#)

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For 10 years, Kerry Bokenfohr lobbied the Vernon School District to eliminate the use of cosmetic pesticides on school grounds.

When she wavered in her commitment, she only had to look at her two children to know that

she was doing the right thing.

Her work paid off earlier this year, when the district voted to stop the spraying of pesticides for cosmetic use.

“I think it took so long because it takes a long time to change something,” said Bokenfohr, a mother of two school-aged children. “It’s a generational thing — people will say ‘it’s what we’ve always done,’ and when we looked into it, it was 25 years of spraying.”

Bokenfohr’s crusade began when she and a group of other parents met regularly in their local playground with their children. When they discovered that pesticides were being used where their children play, they began to appear at meetings of City of Vernon council and the Vernon School District.

“We did our original protest and went to council meetings 10 years ago and had heard from the school board that they were going to reduce the use,” she said. “And then one day my kids were at Beirsto with their babysitter in August, and noticed signs everywhere that pesticides had been used,” she said. “These chemicals were being used where our youngest children play.”

Eventually, Bokenfohr and the other parents, calling themselves Parents for Healthy Play Spaces, contacted West Coast Environmental Law, where they learned that a grant was available through the Environmental Dispute Resolution Fund. This allowed the group to hire Smithers-based lawyer Richard Overstall to help them develop a legal strategy.

“We just felt that we were being ignored by the school board, so we contacted this group and asked what can we do, and we were told we needed to get their spraying records and found they’d been spraying every rock, crack and crevice, as well as the playing fields,” said Bokenfohr.

After finding that there were few options under the province’s Integrated Pest Act, Overstall advised the parents to turn to section 11 of the School Act which reads, in part, “If a decision of an employee of a board significantly affects the education, health or safety of a student, the parents of the student or the student may, within a reasonable time from the date that the parent or student was informed of the decision, appeal that decision to the board.

Acting on behalf of the parents, Overstall filed an appeal of the district’s use of Par III in July 2009.

This process led to the formation of a sub-committee appointed by the district to re-examine the pesticide use policy.

“We didn’t know which way it would go, and I didn’t find out until the minutes from the June board meeting were posted in September. I’m just so glad this was accomplished,” she said. “This whole thing was difficult. I wasn’t very popular — I’m a private person, so it was hard to put myself out there. I took breaks from this over the years, but I kept looking around me, when you have kids, things change and as moms we see a whole different world through their eyes.”

According to Pesticide Free B.C., more than 170 cities and towns across Canada have passed partial or full bans on pesticide use.

School board chairman Bill Turanski said the last time pesticides were used in the district was the summer of 2009.

“On June 15, 2010, the board passed a motion to place a moratorium on the use of pesticides for cosmetic purposes until it received a recommendation from the Community/Advisory Committee for Pesticide Management,” said Turanski. “At the May 17, 2011 public meeting, the board gave first reading to an amended policy consistent with the committee’s recommendation that the use of pesticides for cosmetic purposes be permanently banned. At our June meeting, the board gave second and third reading (to approve) this amended policy.”

Bokenfohr said her children are proud of the work she’s done — they were babies when she started this process and are now students at Beirsto.

“Our kids are worth it, that’s what kept me going, and I’m hearing from other parents who are surprised they’re still spraying in the city.”

And Bokenfohr believes she still has work to do and is now hoping to help spread the word to eliminate the cosmetic use of pesticides across the province.

The provincial government has appointed a Special Committee on Cosmetic Pesticides to examine options for eliminating the unnecessary use of pesticides in B.C. The committee is inviting submissions from British Columbians, who can participate in a number of ways: making a written submission; participating in the e-consultation process; or by sending the committee a video or audio file. For more information, see www.leg.bc.ca. or call toll-free, 1-877-428-8337.

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