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Zero tolerance urged for 2,4-D products

Edmonton Journal

2009-07-30

By Darcy Henton

Province's plan for education rather than fines for using weed-and-feed angers environmentalists

Alberta Environment says it plans to educate, rather than charge, those who violate a new ban on weed-and-feed lawn products proclaimed by cabinet last week.

Paris Ingram, a spokeswoman for Alberta Environment, said the ministry's first approach in enforcing the regulation, which takes effect Jan. 1, will be to talk to people still selling or using fertilizer-herbicide products.

"It's more of an education approach," she said. "If we find someone is still selling it, we'll go out and talk to them first and tell them they are in violation of the regulation. We don't believe anyone would knowingly harm the environment."

She said the province has yet to determine the maximum fine for violating the new regulation.

But environmentalists and provincial opposition party members criticized the policy, saying Alberta Environment should take violations of the new law more seriously.

"If it's clear and it's communicated effectively, there should be no tolerance for using banned pesticides," said Liberal Leader Dr. David Swann. "We have to ensure we don't allow those kinds of chemicals into the environment. If the government is doing its job and communicates that these chemicals are not safe to use, we should be fining people who continue to use them."

Sierra Club Prairie chapter spokeswoman Lindsay Telfer said while it is important to educate Albertans about the ban, there also needs to be a level of enforcement or people will ignore it.

"If you are not doing any kind of enforcement, people will continue to use these products."

Telfer said the scientific evidence of the harm weed-and-feed products do to humans and animals is clear, and the government has an obligation to enforce the ban to protect people from the respiratory illnesses and cancers they cause.

"We're poisoning ourselves and the animals that share the Earth with us," she said.

Telfer called on the province to go further and follow the lead of other Canadian provinces in banning cosmetic lawn-care products.

Ingram said Quebec, Ontario and New Brunswick have either banned them or are in the process of banning them, and all three provinces as well as Newfoundland are prohibiting the use of fertilizer herbicides.

She said Alberta passed legislation to ban weed and feed after a study of surface water and run-off downstream of urban areas showed high levels of 2,4-D, which is found in herbicides.

"When it rains or you water your lawn, the excess (herbicide) runs off your lawn and into streams," she said. "This is just an easy way to eliminate one of the chemicals in the chemical soup that ends up in our surface water."

Studies have shown the some people have applied more than 10 times the prescribed amount of herbicide.

The ban on herbicide-fertilizer combination products doesn't include products intended for spot application to weeds.

Alberta Environment said the average amount of 2,4-D in surface water downstream of Alberta municipalities is still below the recommended federal threshold.

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