



Why does BC government want to ban pesticides with same risks as pickles and cell phones?

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The busybody tendencies of BC politicians are leading to the further regulation of what had previously been the refuge of green thumbs across the province: green lawns, colorful flower beds, and ripening vegetable gardens.

As of early July, the BC government has been reviewing the feasibility of further regulating your private garden by adopting ill-conceived laws restricting pesticide use that do not accurately reflect the current state of scientific knowledge. A hasty ban on the cosmetic use of artificial pesticides should not be implemented until the underlying science is conclusive and a comprehensive analysis of the potential side effects resulting from the ban has been undertaken.

By banning pesticides for cosmetic uses, BC would be following the questionable precedent set by several other provinces. For example, Ontario has restricted the sale and use of more than 250 pesticide products and 80 pesticide ingredients. These provincial prohibitions on cosmetic use of artificial pesticides may apply to lawns, vegetable and ornamental gardens, driveways, cemeteries, public parks and school grounds. Similarly, dozens of municipalities across Canada have introduced their own restrictions on cosmetic pesticide use.

The justification for a ban on the cosmetic use of artificial pesticides is based on the 'precautionary principle' which concludes that any activity that might potentially constitute a "threat of harm" on humans or the ecosystem should be curtailed or abated regardless of whether a "cause-and-effect" relationship has been concretely established.

For example, the Canadian Cancer Society argues that the current evidence of a connection between cancer and artificial pesticide exposure is sufficient to justify a ban, despite readily admitting that no "cause-and-effect" relationship has been "established scientifically."

Yet many of the artificial pesticides that would be banned are not proven to be carcinogenic. For example, the World Health Organization only lists the common pesticide 2,4-D in the same cancer risk category as pickled vegetables and cell phones. And just recently, the United States Environmental Protection Agency conducted a review of the scientific literature and concluded that there was no evidence of a link between cancer and 2,4-D.

If we take the 'precautionary principle' to its natural conclusion, governments should also be banning household soap. Scientists at Cornell University have developed the Environmental Impact Quotient (EIQ) as a measure of the relative impact of common pesticide ingredients on humans and the environment. The EIQ is actually lower for many artificial pesticides than the EIQ for many other mundane household items and 'natural' pesticide alternatives. For example, the EIQ for soap is higher than the EIQ for the common pesticide ingredient 2,4-D.

While politicians may think they're doing good, a ban on the use of artificial pesticides for cosmetic purposes imposes costs on many British Columbians. The existence of a market for pesticides for cosmetic use suggests that Canadians derive value from having these landscape enhancing products available for purchase. Prohibiting the cosmetic use of artificial pesticides ignores the benefits Canadians enjoy in maintaining aesthetically pleasing green landscapes.

Furthermore, a blanket prohibition on cosmetic pesticide use lacks the careful contrasting of costs and benefits that should be undertaken before any possible regulations are adopted. A wiser approach to evaluating the merits of any regulation controlling cosmetic pesticide use would weigh the trade-offs implied by the proposed regulation.

Making matters worse, a blanket ban might also encourage individuals to substitute the banned product with alternatives that can be potentially more hazardous. Consider the recent case of a Victoria couple who accidentally set their home ablaze while trying to eradicate their weed problem with a blow torch, since artificial pesticide use is banned in Victoria.

Though this case is anecdotal, it lends credibility to the assertion that using public policy to subvert market forces and regulate the availability of certain commodities that might potentially pose some kind of a risk is likely to give birth to other risks. These other risks arise from the sometimes clever, sometimes careless, ways Canadians adapt to altered incentives resulting from regulation.

BC politicians should avoid enacting poorly designed regulations to control pesticide use that may ultimately prove more damaging than the pesticides themselves.