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Committee passes the buck on pesticide-free B.C.

By Lisa Gue, environmental health policy analyst

The long-awaited report from B.C.'s special legislative committee on cosmetic pesticides was not worth the wait. The committee had been mulling over a province-wide ban on lawn chemicals for close to a year, ever since Premier Christy Clark announced her support for a ban and appointed the committee to consider how to proceed.

Unfortunately, it seems the committee missed the point. It is deeply disappointing that after all that mulling, the report, released May 17, does not even recommend a ban. Instead, it proposes a series of toothless measures and tries to pass the buck on the main issue: "Committee members representing the majority are satisfied with how the [federal Pest Management Regulatory Agency] registers and reevaluates pesticides and are confident with the scientific integrity of the federal processes."

The use of pesticides to improve the appearance of lawns and gardens represents a needless risk to the environment and human health. A ban would help to protect those most vulnerable, notably children. But in areas of shared jurisdiction, it's always tempting for lawmakers to make it sound like someone else is responsible for a decision. Pesticide regulation is no exception, and B.C.'s legislative committee jumped feet first into this trap. Rather than delivering serious recommendations for shaping a B.C. ban, this report defers the issue back to federal regulators.

But the federal regulatory regime has gaps. For starters, the federal risk assessments assume that pesticides are used according to label instructions — a leap of faith. Then there's the limitation that each pesticide is assessed on its own with no consideration of the combined effects of multiple chemical exposures. Nor does the federal registration system weigh the need for pesticides whose only purpose is to improve the appearance of lawns and gardens.

In other words, is the risk, however small, worth it? Moreover, many pesticides previously approved through the federal risk assessment process have later been banned as new information emerged about health and environmental hazards, and dozens of active ingredients in pesticides approved in Canada are not permitted in other countries. It is well within a province's mandate to take precautionary action now to eliminate unnecessary chemical exposures.

Six Canadian provinces — and 40 B.C. municipalities — have already banned the cosmetic use of pesticides. These governments are taking seriously the provincial role in pesticide regulation. Applying the precautionary principle, they moved to address gaps in the federal regime when it comes to the completely unnecessary hazards posed by the use of pesticides to improve the appearance of lawns and gardens.

Of the 7,300 comments submitted to the B.C. legislative committee this winter, nearly 5,000 supported a ban. The committee report also notes that some MLAs on the committee (although not the majority) were likewise in favour of a ban. A province-wide ban on the use and sale of cosmetic pesticides is an appropriate and manageable expression of provincial authorities that would protect public health and the environment from an avoidable chemical hazard.

It's been a year since the premier pledged her support for a ban. "We are going to do it," she told reporters. The committee process stalled the issue in the legislature for a year. The premier should go beyond the recommendations in the committee report and finally make good on her promise. It's time for B.C. to catch up with the rest of the country and go for truly green lawns and gardens.

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<http://www.daidsuzuki.org/blogs/panther-lounge/2012/05/committee-passes-the-buck-on-pesticide-free-bc/>