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Residential pesticides should be restricted, not banned, in B.C.: committee

Dirk Meissner, The Canadian Press
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VICTORIA - Science says "No" when it comes to banning cosmetic use of pesticides in British Columbia, but the politics screams "Yes," admits the chairman of an all-party government committee probing pesticide use.

Kootenay East Liberal MLA Bill Bennett said 350 scientists at Health Canada say B.C. doesn't need to ban cosmetic pesticide use, but Premier Christy Clark has already promised to get rid of them.

"We're not government," said Bennett. "We're a legislative committee. We had an opportunity to take a look at this and put the politics aside."

The eight-member committee — five Liberals, three New Democrats — was appointed last June to examine the scope of a possible ban on the sale and use of cosmetic pesticides.

After 8,675 submissions, 22 meetings and presentations from environmental groups, industry organizations, scientific organizations and academics, the committee made 17 recommendations, but did not call for a ban on the pesticides used to ensure a perfect lawn and weed-free garden.

"Critics may say that myself as chair and the majority members don't care about human health, don't care about children, don't care about people that get cancer," said Bennett, adding that two of his grandparents, his mother, father and an uncle all succumbed to cancer.

Bennett suggested he was slightly pre-disposed to supporting a ban for health reasons, but wasn't convinced it was needed after reviewing the evidence.

"If I was convinced that we needed to do this, I would definitely have been there," he said. "From our perspective, the scientific evidence does not warrant preventing British Columbians from buying and using approved domestic-class pesticides."

Bennett said Clark and her cabinet still have the power to overrule the committee's recommendations and introduce a ban.

But he said the report represents an effort to put science ahead of shifting political winds.

"What possible political advantage could there be to us making this announcement?" he said. "I think that there is almost a chemo-phobia in society. There is a lack of scientific literacy."

Environmental groups reacted harshly to the committee's recommendations, saying pesticide use represents a threat to the health of British Columbians.

"On May 17, 2012, the Liberal government chose the weakest response across Canada," said a headline emblazoned on Pesticide Free BC's website. "B.C. is not getting a cosmetic pesticide ban."

The website stated the government moved quickly in 2011 to protect sled dogs after a dog slaughter in Whistler, but it's moving slowly when it comes to protecting children and families from pesticides.

Clark said during her Liberal leadership campaign in 2011 she wanted to see a cosmetic pesticide ban.

"These dangerous pesticides are proven to increase the likelihood of childhood cancer and other illnesses, and have no place near our homes," she said in a campaign statement.

"I don't want to see my son playing on a lawn with toxic pesticides. I don't want to see anyone's child playing on a lawn with toxic pesticides."

On Thursday, Clark wasn't as adamant about a introducing ban in a telephone interview from Seoul, South Korea where she is on a trade mission.

"This is a recommendation from the legislative committee," she said. "It's not a decision of the government. It adds to the information we had."

Bennett said the health and environmental arguments for a cosmetic pesticide ban are compelling, but the committee was not convinced cosmetic pesticide use "was endangering the health of people, whether their children, pregnant women or anybody."

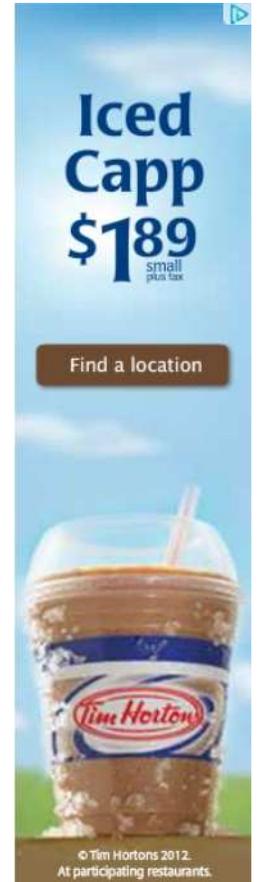
Bennett said he was aware that 40 B.C. communities have local pesticide bylaws in force and seven provinces have legislated cosmetic pesticide use bans, but he stuck to his scientific argument.

"When somebody believes her child is being hurt by Roundup or Kill-Ex or some other pesticide, that mom is pretty darn compelling when she goes to council," he said. "Our job was to look at this as objectively as we can."

The committee's three NDP members broke from the committee's decision not to support a cosmetic pesticide use ban and announced support for a ban.

New Democrat Rob Fleming, the committee's deputy chairman, said the NDP will ban cosmetic pesticide use if it forms government.

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