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Manitoba should think twice before banning pesticides

The unintended consequences don't necessarily make for a healthier environment

by the editors on Tuesday, March 6, 2012 8:00am - [4 Comments](#)



Photo By Deborah Baic; The Globe and Mail; CP

Winter is not typically given to thoughts of lawn care. Nevertheless, Manitoba's conservation minister recently announced he's making plans for a pesticide ban. In particular, Gord Mackintosh said he's keen to bring Manitoba's pesticide laws in line with those in other provinces. "Manitobans are entitled to the same protections most other Canadians enjoy," he declared.

Yet Manitobans might want to learn from the experience of those other provinces, rather than simply parrot them. Evidence from other jurisdictions suggests there are numerous unintended consequences to such a ban. And not all of them make for a healthier environment.

Currently every province east of the Manitoba-Ontario border restricts the use of cosmetic pesticides in some way. Mackintosh says he admires the strict bans enforced in Ontario and Nova Scotia. These rules prohibit use of a long list of pesticides on all lawns and fields. Golf courses and farms are exempt.

Of course, every one of these banned pesticides has been certified as safe for residential use by Ottawa's Pest Management Regulatory Agency. PMRA scientists perform rigorous evaluations of all pesticides and when they conclude that one "meets Canada's strict health and safety standards," this verdict carries the weight of exhaustive investigation. Bans, encouraged by lobby groups ranging from family physicians to environmentalists, rest not on competing scientific evidence, but rather a vague unease about chemicals in general.

As such, provincial pesticide bans represent a triumph of sentiment over science. But does this sort of regulation provide a net benefit to society? The experience of other provinces can be revealing.

After two years without pesticides in Ontario, the evidence is starkly visible: mostly browns and yellows. There's little debate the province looks shabbier and weedier now. Parks, sports fields and lawns have become wholly infested with dandelions and a variety of other weeds and there's no practical way to remove them, other than hand-pulling. Whether this is a good or bad thing may depend on your definition of beauty—not to mention the condition of your back and knees. A recent poll found a majority of Ontario homeowners want to end the ban.

But what of other health impacts arising from a pesticide ban? In Chicago, the suburban municipality of Highland Park regularly won awards for the quality of its sports fields. Then four years ago it dropped pesticides for trendy organic pest control. The result was a disaster. In some parks, weeds accounted for over 60 per cent of the ground cover. Many fields were unusable for sports. "The fields are getting worse every year," parks commissioner Cal Bernstein told the Chicago Sun-Times. "Something needs to be done to reverse the trend." In November, the district approved the return of pesticides.

And while pesticide bans are frequently defended by advocates as a way to reduce unknown risks and promote a more natural environment, in fact the opposite may be true.

The number of artificial turf fields in Ontario has recently exploded—from a mere handful a decade ago to over a hundred this year. For Rob Witherspoon, director of the University of Guelph's Turfgrass Institute, the reason for the switch from natural to ersatz is obvious. "Without pesticides it has become a lot more challenging to maintain a natural turf sports field," he observes.

Artificial turf fields boast plenty of advantages, despite their average \$1-million upfront cost. A typical artificial field can provide up to four times the usable playing hours as compared to natural grass, since real turf requires frequent rests and considerable expertise to maintain. Nonetheless, it seems ironic a pesticide ban meant to encourage a greener environment will result in a greater prevalence of plastic sports fields. (Not to mention the issue of how to dispose of an artificial field once its lifespan ends.)

Other real risks have also been overlooked in the unscientific panic about pesticides. Witherspoon notes that grass is not only a natural filter, but also a microbiological system that consumes any bodily fluids leaked, spat or vomited onto it. Not so with an artificial field. In the absence of a cleansing downpour, what's on the field stays on the field. Texas, with a hot, dry climate that favours artificial turf fields, has reported a rate of staph infections among high school students many times the national average. In 2007, footballer Boone Baker of Austin, Texas, almost died from a deadly methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) infection he picked up from his high school's artificial turf. Regular disinfection of artificial fields using industrial-strength chemical products is now a recommended maintenance procedure in all climates.

When it comes to pesticides, Manitoba can learn a lot from the experience of those who've gone before. If the goal is to reduce verifiable risks, promote a more natural environment and encourage healthy activities, banning pesticides seems a strange way to go about it.

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Richard Clarkson, I am retired scientist, federal public servant

I was under the distinct impression that Macleans was a progressive magazine, rather than a mouthpiece for the pesticide industry. Obviously I was badly mistaken! I am shocked!!! Who am I!? I am a retired middle-level federal public servant, thoroughly familiar with the Ottawa's pesticide approval scene. Health Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency (PMRA) is notorious for lagging behind the EU's reviewers of pesticides. This Agency's operating principle, risk management, is based on the false premise that people are exposed to only one chemical at a time, that they have never been exposed before to any toxic chemicals, that pesticides are always used according to the label and are safer when applied by trained applicators. In fact, the PMRA seldom evaluates breakdown products of applied herbicides, which may be highly toxic (more toxic than the original pesticide) and persistent. The often ignored "inerts" of pesticides may amount to as much as 90% of the entire product and may be carcinogenic. Members of The Standing Committee on Health of the 38th Parliament, 1st Session, were told in April 2005 that PMRA is not to be trusted. This Agency has no labs of its own and evaluates data selected and submitted by the pesticide industry almost exclusively. PMRA's use of safety factors in human health risks assessment concerning seniors, pregnant women, children and fetuses is inadequate and ignores cumulative exposures. PMRA's advisory committees were found to be insufficiently independent and over-represented by people with a particular commercial interest. We have no artificial sports fields in Ottawa and our naturally maintained sports fields are doing just fine. I know because my grandson plays soccer regularly. My suburban substantial lawn is green and weedless, as are lawns of my neighbours. Shame on Macleans.ca for peddling pesticide industry's propaganda so blatantly. Who says the "panic" about pesticides is unscientific? Since when the editors of Mcleans have acquired the right to consider themselves experts on this important issue? Black is white and white is black. How can highly toxic pesticides, some of which were notorious for their past application on battlefields, be a means of achieving a healthy environment and encourage healthy activities? If they are so wonderful, why not spray them on our breakfast eggs, instead of salt? This is the most appalling article I have read in recent months. Manitoba should think twice before taking this harmful nonsense seriously.

[5 hours ago](#)

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Atomic_Walrus



Congratulations. You've picked holes in PMRA's protocols without providing any substantive evidence to prove that your concerns are valid. Gaps in data provided by the pesticide industry might be a problem, but I'll give higher weight to even an incomplete data set than unsubstantiated assertions.

[7 minutes ago](#) [in reply to Richard Clarkson](#)

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Mfabbbott2003

Why are they so worried about what I walk on, when they spray everything I eat??

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pcoq

We don't need toxic, cosmetic herbicides and insecticides in our soil, ground water and air. If lawns are brown and yellow, they are lacking water, not poison. We need to re-evaluate the definition of a beautiful park to align with nature, rather than trying to force it to conform to an imaginary ideal.

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