

**Current weather**

for Hepburn

reporting from CWB Le John Farms



-8.3°C

High: -2°C

Low: -12°C

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Pesticide ban position questioned

Posted Feb. 16th, 2012 by [Robert Amason](#)[No Comments](#)

If there isn't a scientific connection, why would one of Canada's largest charities use donor dollars to promote pesticide bans across the country? | [File photo](#)

When the Manitoba government announced plans for a cosmetic pesticide ban in early February, it cited research done by several health organizations to justify its new policy on pesticides.

One of them was the Canadian Cancer Society, which has spent thousands and possibly millions of donor dollars on anti-pesticide information and advocacy.



Yet on its website, the society states there is no proven link between pesticides and cancer. If there isn't a scientific connection, why would one of Canada's largest charities use donor dollars to promote pesticide bans across the country?

Greg Thomson thinks he knows why.

Thomson is director of research at Charity Intelligence, which conducts research on Canadian charities to help donors make informed giving decisions.

He said the society's advocacy for pesticide bans isn't entirely motivated by its desire to protect Canadians from the dangers of pesticides. Its stance is also about raising money.

"There's a lot of statements that come out of large charities that have to be tempered by the fact that they are marketing statements," said Thomson, who studies the cancer society for Charity Intelligence.

Gillian Bromfield, senior manager for cancer control policy with the cancer society, said spending donor contributions on pesticide advocacy and information is justified, despite the lack of a proven link between pesticides and cancer.

"Even if it (the science) is not conclusive, it does suggest a reason for concern," she said.

"We think there is a potential for harm from exposure to pesticides ... and at this point we think it is important to help reduce exposures to possible cancer causing agents."

The cosmetic pesticide ban became an agricultural issue in Manitoba immediately after its announcement, provoking a forceful reaction from farm leaders.

While a ban doesn't restrict the agricultural use of herbicides and insecticides, producers are worried that weeds will spread from municipal property to farmland. As well, there is the concern that a ban will harden public sentiment against pesticides, said Doug Chorney, president of Keystone Agricultural Producers.

In other words, consumers will begin to ask why farmers are allowed to spray chemicals on food if spraying pesticides on lawns is dangerous.

The cancer society's recommendation to ban cosmetic pesticides in Canada tops the list of reasons the Manitoba government has given for introducing the legislation.

However, Thomson said the society's support of bans is puzzling because a page on its website states that scientific research doesn't "provide a conclusive link between pesticides and human cancer."

Thomson said donors should ask why the society is spending money on an anti-pesticide campaign if there isn't an established connection.

"If there is really no proof, at this point, that pesticides cause cancer, I would prefer that my dollar to the Canadian Cancer Society not go towards that."

He said part of his job is to inform the public about what the society is advocating, the validity of the science backing the advocacy and how much money the society spends on those activities.

The society spent \$41 million in 2010-11 on activities related to cancer prevention, information and advocacy, while spending \$49 million on cancer research.

In spite of his concerns, Thomson said the society is taking a safe position on pesticides because the Canadian public has little love for chemicals and more consumers are embracing organic food.

"On this issue, it (their position) makes sense to me," he said. "There's not much of a downside to saying we think this should be restricted."

Thomson said it's not unusual for charities to take a position to appease or motivate a certain group of donors because they are in the business of both helping people and raising funds.

“They have the knowledge that what they state may or may not attract future dollars,” he said.

However, he is still concerned that the society is calling for a cosmetic pesticide ban when the science linking pesticides to cancer is so tenuous.

“I’d rather them figure out there is a link before they make that statement,” he said. “I would say please show me the proof.”

However, Bromfield argued that there is scientific evidence to support the society’s position on pesticides and said information on her organization’s website about the lack of a proven link isn’t the complete picture.

“The evidence linking pesticides and cancer isn’t definitive, but it is suggestive and it is growing,” she said. “Our position on the cosmetic use of pesticides is based on the body of scientific evidence that suggests that some substances in pesticides may increase the risk of developing cancer… What we would want your readers to understand is that there is actually good, quality research… that does suggest a link between pesticides and cancer.”

She conceded there is little evidence of a cancer risk from eating fruit and vegetables with pesticide residue.

“Nationally or internationally, there’s no research I’m aware of that has shown an increased risk from low level pesticide residue on vegetables and fruit.”

Nonetheless, a food and pesticides page on its website has a lengthy section on organic food, including information on a study indicating that children who ate organic food did not have traces of pesticides in their urine.

Bromfield said the cancer society isn’t calling for a switch from conventional food production to organic.

“We do encourage farming practices that reduce pesticides to minimize exposure for farm workers and farm communities … but I can state quite clearly that we aren’t advocating for a movement towards organic farming.”

Thomson said it would be reasonable for farmers to think twice before donating to the cancer society, considering that its position on pesticides is influencing public policy and could potentially affect

producers' livelihoods if it leads to restrictions on agricultural pesticides or increases demand for organic food.

However, Dan Mazier, who farms north of Brandon, said it's unlikely the cancer society's stance on pesticides would affect his donation decisions.

What he would like to see is a healthy discussion between the two groups regarding the economic need for pesticides and the potential health risks associated with the chemicals, rather than the cancer society pointing a finger at farmers and producers pointing angry fingers back at the society.

Canadian Health Association's policies on pesticides:

- The Canadian Medical Association doesn't recommend a ban on the use of cosmetic pesticides, but it does call for more research on the health impact of chemical substances and recommends that pesticide use be minimized and managed wisely.
- The Canadian Paediatric Society does not have a position on the health risk of pesticides. The organization doesn't have a position because volunteer committees, which raise policy issues, have not brought concerns about pesticides to the CPS board. The CPS does have policies on banning children from tanning salons and preventing snowboarding injuries.
- The Ontario College of Family Physicians published a review of pesticides and human health in 2004. It concluded that pesticide exposure is linked to cancer, reproductive problems and neurological diseases and that children are particularly vulnerable to pesticides. Environmental groups and health advocates often cite the report to highlight the dangers of pesticides but Health Canada has discredited the OCFP report. It said the report relied on a small group of epidemiological studies to connect pesticides and disease.

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