

Coalition seeks pesticide ban

Health groups want curb on spraying that's used for purely cosmetic reasons

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Ontario is being lobbied by a number of well-known medical, public-health and environmental organizations to institute a provincewide ban on the aesthetic use of pesticides.

If the Liberal government accepts the idea, Ontario would be the second province, after Quebec, to take this action and it would mean that more than half of the country's residents live in areas where the use of pesticides for cosmetic reasons has been made illegal, based on health concerns. Dozens of cities, including Toronto and Halifax, also have bans.

"We're hoping for legislation in Ontario like the legislation they've got in Quebec," said Gideon Forman, executive director of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment, one of the groups requesting the ban.

It would mean homeowners would not be permitted to spray lawns with herbicides, such as 2,4-D, to kill dandelions just because they don't like the looks of the weed; they would only be able to use products to kill pests, such as rats or mosquitoes, that pose recognized health threats.

"When you're using pesticides to change appearance, that's a cosmetic pesticide. Crab grass and dandelions don't threaten anyone's health," Mr. Forman said.

A delegation from his organization, along with the Canadian Cancer Society's Ontario wing, the Ontario College of Family Physicians, Pesticide Free Ontario, and the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario, plans to meet with Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Health officials today to seek a ban.

To help convince the government that the public supports the move, Pesticide Free Ontario commissioned a poll that will be released today showing overwhelming backing for provincewide restrictions.

According to the poll, 71 per cent of Ontario residents support a ban, while 22 per cent are opposed. The poll has a margin of error of three percentage points.

Supporters of the ban come from all parties. "Whether people are Conservative or Green, it's still a majority," Mr. Forman said. "It shows it's not a partisan thing."

The groups will also lobby other parties, said Mr. Forman, who believes endorsing a ban would be an easy way for a party to court environmentally minded voters.

"We think it's a good election-year issue for them. We know they're looking for green issues -- the government and the opposition -- and it doesn't cost very much, unlike closing coal plants," he said.

There are bans in place in more than 120 communities across the country, said Mike Christie, an Ottawa environmentalist who tracks figures on municipal pesticide restrictions.

PEI is also moving to make some pesticides harder to buy by making it mandatory to sell products with higher health risks from behind the counter.

There has been some political pressure for a ban in Ontario. Last week, provincial Green Party Leader Frank de Jong called on the government to legislate an end to synthetic lawn and garden pesticides use after the communities of Pickering and Oakville voted recently for restrictions.

The Canadian Cancer Society has also thrown its weight behind the lobbying effort.

The group is concerned that homeowners using pesticides may be inadvertently be exposing themselves to substances that are suspected cancer-causing agents, spokeswoman Jordan Beischlag said. It is a risk she thinks people should not be allowed to take for the look of their lawns.

"At the end of the day, since we know that ornamental use of pesticides has no countervailing health benefit, and has the potential to cause harm to human health, we're calling for a ban," Ms. Beischlag said.

There is a growing body of scientific research linking pesticides to some illnesses, such as non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and breast cancer, although not all studies have found associations.

Health Canada regulates pesticides, including those used by homeowners, and says they pose low risks if used properly. But Ms. Beischlag says the health implications of using pesticides are not fully known, so public health authorities should take a precautionary approach.

"We should err on the side of caution, especially when it comes to human health," she said.

The effort to ban pesticides has been proceeding much like efforts to deal with smoking did; local municipalities were the first to place restrictions on cigarette use in public areas, causing provincial governments eventually to follow suit.

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