

B.C. should ban lawn pesticides

Similar legislation elsewhere has been a boon to business while protecting health of children and families

BY GIDEON FORMAN, VANCOUVER SUN JULY 5, 2011



More than seven out of 10 British Columbians support a phase-out of cosmetic or non-essential pesticides, according to a 2010 poll.

Rightly or wrongly, British Columbia seems to have a reputation in Canada for having one of the most polarized political climates in the country. That's why when two rivals from opposite ends of the political spectrum agree on an important public policy issue it deserves to get noticed — and be celebrated.

In June, we witnessed one of these rare moments of bipartisanship when Premier Christy Clark and Opposition leader Adrian Dix stood in the legislature to confirm their support for a lawn and garden

pesticide ban in the province to help prevent cancer and other diseases. This ban would not include pesticides used for agricultural or forestry purposes. To that end, a Special Committee on Cosmetic Pesticides was formed and will meet for the first time today.

In addition to protecting the health of children and families, the ban will benefit both the environment and the economy.

Why do we believe that?

Because we've witnessed the effect of similar cosmetic pesticide bans that have been implemented in more than 35 B.C. municipalities, Ontario, Quebec and Nova Scotia.

Since Quebec's 2003 pesticide ban, the rate of use of these chemical pesticides has been reduced to just four per cent of households with a lawn or garden. With no ban in place, B.C.'s rate of pesticide use is 26 per cent. When Ontario's pesticide ban came into effect in April 2009, the province removed more than 250 of these toxic products from the market. The benefits to human health are obvious.

Ontario's ban is also improving water quality. Their Environment Ministry studied pesticide concentrations in 10 urban streams before and after the ban came into effect (2008 versus 2009). They concluded that concentrations of herbicides and total insecticides were significantly lower in 2009. In fact, in some streams pesticide concentrations were up to 97-per-cent lower. That's an extraordinary result and suggests a provincewide pesticide ban here would have similar benefits for local waterways.

The Ontario experience has also been positive for many lawn care businesses. The maker of a non-toxic corn-gluten-based weed inhibitor enjoyed a 400-per-cent increase in sales and manufacturing in the ban's first six months. They needed to move to larger premises. Other Ontario entrepreneurs have used the ban as an opportunity for business growth and new hiring, particularly as it relates to the emergence of new organic lawn care techniques.

These economic benefits have also been realized in Nova Scotia. In the five years since Halifax introduced its cosmetic pesticide ban, the number of landscaping and lawn care businesses in the city grew by 53 per cent. Toronto experienced similar growth after its ban. While these statistics may have had a role to play in creating this episode of bipartisanship at the B.C. legislature last month, some other numbers might have been taken into consideration as well — specifically polling numbers. Survey after survey has concluded that a cosmetic pesticide ban is also a political winner with the public.

To cite a recent example, a 2010 Innovative Research Group poll found more than seven of every 10 British Columbians support a phase-out of cosmetic or non-essential pesticides. The survey found 72 per cent of British Columbians believe these pesticides pose a threat to the environment and nearly 70 per cent believe they threaten children. Perhaps most significantly, the study found support for the phase-out does not differ between rural and urban areas. The message is clear. No matter where they live in the province, the vast majority of British Columbians want a ban on the sale and use of these toxic lawn and garden products.

As powerful as this public opinion may be, we also trust Dix, Clark and their colleagues are supporting a ban on these cosmetic pesticides because they know it is the right thing to do. They know that when pesticides are taken off store shelves fewer children will be exposed to chemicals, thereby reducing their risk for medical problems. They know there is a growing body of evidence showing a connection between cosmetic pesticides and cancer rates in children and adults. They know doctors writing in scientific journals have found that the common weed-killer 2, 4-D “can be persuasively linked to cancers, neurological impairment and reproductive problems — and that children are at greatest risk.”

While we are not naive enough to think the common cause expressed by Clark and Dix last month will bring an end to all things political in B.C., we are optimistic that British Columbians will soon have legislation on this long-overdue ban on cosmetic pesticides.

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