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Green lawns not worth the health risks: doctors

[Judith Lavoie \(/authors?author=Judith Lavoie\)](#) / Times Colonist

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Doctors and nurses want British Columbians to think about whether a green lawn and bug-free plants are worth the risk of cancer, birth defects or neurological disorders such as Parkinson's or Alzheimer's diseases.

A campaign, starting next week and led by the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment, is asking the B.C. government to reconsider its decision not to ban cosmetic pesticides.

Advertisements, signed by more than 100 doctors and nurses and supported by the David Suzuki Foundation and Environmental Defence, urge the government "to enact a provincewide ban on the use and sale of non-essential pesticides."

Although the provincial government is making changes to the Integrated Pest Management Act, they fall far short of the outright ban pledged by Premier Christy Clark during her Liberal leadership campaign.

Instead, the legislation, which has been tabled but not yet passed, will require a licensed sprayer to apply most pesticides in landscaped areas.

Regulations will be developed in consultation with the landscaping industry and retailers, said an Environment Ministry spokesman.

Gideon Forman, executive director of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment, said that it is baffling that B.C. is not following the example of six other provinces and banning lawn pesticides.

"There's no reason to take this risk when the only thing you're doing is changing the appearance of a property," Forman said from Toronto.

"I think this provincial government is not as attuned to environmental and health issues as we would like them to be."

Research on the health risks is strong, Forman said.

"There's a broadening and deepening of the science on pesticides that is painting a more and more ominous picture."

The new rules won't protect B.C.'s children and, instead, will entrench the ability of landscapers and lawn care companies to keep spraying as long as they want, he said.

The organization has 5,800 members and, increasingly, doctors and nurses see protecting the environment from poisons as part of their mandate, Forman said. They have decided cosmetic pesticides are such an important issue that they need to become involved.

The Environment Ministry said the legislative changes take into account 8,000 responses from public consultations and the work of a special committee.

"While many people do not want pesticides used for cosmetic reasons, 5,000 people who responded to our 2010 consultation indicated they believed some pesticides could be used safely for cosmetic reasons," said an emailed statement from the ministry.

"The special committee also came to the conclusion that regulations restricting the use of cosmetic pesticides should be tightened, but there was not enough evidence to support an outright ban."

NDP environment critic Rob Fleming said Clark "completely betrayed" her promises for a ban on cosmetic pesticides.

Instead she has introduced some "status quo tinkering amendments," he said, calling the legislation an empty shell because regulations will be put together by the ministry.

Consumers will still be able to buy pesticides at the hardware store, but must then find a licensed applicator to put it on their lawn, Fleming said.

"It's like allowing a minor to buy cigarettes at the store as long as they promise they are for their parents," he said.

The new rules will create confusion among consumers and irritate the many municipalities that wanted to end the patchwork legislation, Fleming said.

Many municipalities have banned the use of cosmetic pesticides, but do not have the power to control what is sold in stores.

"They were waiting for the province to show some leadership," Fleming said.

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