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National pesticide ban crucial to green agenda

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By: Gideon Forman Published on Wed Jan 17 2007

In recent days, the federal government has said it wants input on how it might improve its green plan and preserve Canada's beleaguered environment. May we suggest that Ottawa begin with a simple step that would protect human and ecological health, boost business, and have a real, immediate impact on people's lives? We're talking about banning lawn and garden pesticides.

These chemicals – they embrace herbicides, insecticides, and fungicides – are already restricted in some 120 Canadian communities, including Halifax, Toronto, London, and the Province of Quebec. But unfortunately millions of people, including those living in Ottawa, Winnipeg, Calgary, and Edmonton, are still exposed to these wholly unnecessary poisons.

In these places and hundreds of others, pesticides can be applied to private property adjacent to schools, seniors' homes, even day-care centres. They can often be used on children's sports fields.

Looking back 50 years from now, historians will be amazed that in 2007 these toxic products were still permitted, given all we know about their links with very serious medical conditions.

In a landmark 2004 study – the most comprehensive in Canada – the Ontario College of Family Physicians found pesticide exposure is associated with brain cancer, prostate cancer, kidney cancer and pancreatic cancer.

It discovered that children exposed to pesticides, especially insecticides and herbicides used on lawns, fruit trees and gardens, have an increased risk of leukemia.

As well, the chemicals were found to threaten reproductive health, contributing to underweight babies, birth defects, and even fetal death.

In April 2006, the Canadian Paediatric Society, our country's premier authority on children's health, published a scientific report on the most common weed killer, 2,4-D. It concluded that "the balance of epidemiological research suggests that 2,4-D can be persuasively linked to cancers, neurological impairment and reproductive problems."

If we were in the position of having to protect Canada from a plague of insects or rodents, we might consider using some of these products.

But given that the issue is cosmetic use – destroying dandelions because we don't like the way they look – these chemicals seem to be overkill indeed.

Particularly galling is the fact that, according to a new David Suzuki Foundation study, there are 60 pesticides allowed in Canada that have been banned by other industrialized nations because they threaten human and environmental health.

For example, 2,4-D is perfectly legal in this country but has been outlawed by Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.

Prohibiting lawn pesticides won't make Ottawa a world-leader, but it would give our citizens the same protection that people in other OECD nations enjoy.

Would such legislation harm industry?

Evidence from Halifax, the first large city to regulate lawn pesticides, suggests just the opposite.

Halifax phased in its legislation from 2000 to 2003. Figures compiled by Statistics Canada show that, from 2000 to 2005, the number of landscaping companies in the city increased 53 per cent – from 118 to 180. The number of employees went up as well. We suspect that when pesticide restrictions were enacted a larger number of homeowners needed professional assistance – not to apply familiar chemicals but to employ less well-known non-toxic methods.

A prohibition on cosmetic herbicides and insecticides would have enormous benefits:

It would lower cancer risks, especially for children; reduce occupational hazards for lawn care professionals (who would no longer have to spend their lives steeped in poisons); and cut toxic runoff into our lakes and streams.

It's supported by our most distinguished medical authorities, including the Canadian Cancer Society, and polls show it has the backing of a majority of citizens.

Best of all, it could be passed this spring and come into effect next year – a full 42 years before emission reductions, the centrepiece of Ottawa's green plan.

Gideon Forman is executive director of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment.