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The great pesticide debate

City committee to vote on the phasing out of cosmetic pesticides on Wednesday

Emma Gilchrist, Calgary Herald

Published: Friday, June 20, 2008

Advocates for a pesticide ban raise concerns with the methodology of the Pest Management Regulatory Agency's report and point to countless other studies that link pesticide exposure with health concerns, while opponents -- many from the lawn care and chemical industries -- say environmentalists are fear-mongering.

Pincott, one of three aldermen who brought forward the proposal for a ban, questions the credibility of the Pest Management Regulatory Agency.

"They didn't retest the chemicals; they just did a literature review," Pincott says, pointing to a 2003 federal auditor general's report that raised concerns about the regulatory agency. Among the concerns: the agency relies on industry to supply data on its own products and only evaluates chemicals on a one by one basis -- the cumulative effects of chemicals aren't taken into account.

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The agency confirms that it does not test the products itself, but says test guidelines set by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development are in place to prevent data from being manipulated.

As for cumulative effects, however, the agency says there are only a few chemical groups that are well enough understood to allow estimation of cumulative risk. But the agency does take into consideration the effects of life-time exposure to any single pesticide.

The combined effect of chemicals in the environment is a growing environmental theme, often called the "chemical soup" concept. It maintains that we simply don't know the effect all of these combined substances on our health -- and that if we don't know, we should err on the side of caution.

"They are not needed. They are not protecting our health and they are not protecting the environment. It's a no-brainer," McLeod says. "If we can achieve the same things by natural means, then why aren't we doing it?"

She says that by planting more appropriate species and using eco-friendly techniques on lawns, such as top-dressing and aerating, the need for pesticides to kill dandelions can be greatly reduced.

Pincott says municipal governments need to take the lead on this issue.

"Any province that has implemented a ban, or is looking at it, has followed the lead of its cities," Pincott says. "We have to show that leadership."

He says a pesticide ban is about public health and safety.

"It's really simple: to remove needless exposure to poisons. It's something people are asking me to do."

Lawn care companies, however, take issue with a ban, arguing they must still be allowed to spot spray areas where there are weeds and pests.

Nutri-Lawn, which advertises "ecology friendly lawn care," is in favour of stronger restrictions on pesticides, but not a full-out ban.

Marketing manager Ryan Nix says Nutri-Lawn would like to see pesticides available, but only to people who are licensed to apply them.

"They are safe if applied by the label instructions . . . but there is no control as to whether they are followed."

About 25 per cent of Nutri-Lawn customers pay roughly 20 per cent more for an organic lawn care program.

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