

Staples: Pesticide ban should not include useful poisons

BY DAVID STAPLES, EDMONTONJOURNAL.COM FEBRUARY 7, 2012 6:06 PM



Pesticide ban should not include useful poisons.

Photograph by: Bruce Edwards, SEE BYLINE!

EDMONTON - I see the future of Edmonton: I see dandelions. A lot more dandelions. And maybe more head lice.

The effort to get rid of pesticides is unrelenting, it's rooted in the very real fear that pesticides cause dreadful diseases such as cancer, and I predict it will one day mean we will no longer accept the spraying of pesticides to get rid of dandelions and other weeds in Edmonton.

But if we are too fearful and move too fast, the anti-pesticide movement could also lead us to ban some useful poisons that help us kill the most pernicious weeds and most bothersome bugs, such as head lice.

That's why it was prudent this week for a city council committee to once again turn down calls for a ban for all "non-essential" uses of pesticides. Both insecticides and herbicides are classified as pesticides.

Instead, the committee opted for two more years of study on the issue. That gives us all more years to figure out just how dangerous pesticides really are and what pesticides should and shouldn't be used on.

The most vocal councillor against bringing a pesticide ban to Edmonton was Coun. Kim Krushell.

She was swayed by federal and provincial health officials, who have repeatedly explained to council about the significant amount of testing done to make sure that pesticides – if used properly – have no negative impact on human health. “Of all the industries we have in this country, pesticides and insecticides is the No. 1 regulated industry,” Krushell says.

Some studies show that people who use these chemicals every day in their work may be at a higher risk of cancer, but there's nothing conclusive, she says.

She has concerns about the over-use and potential harm of pesticide use, but wonders how far the anti-pesticide crowd wants to push things.

At the recent Communities in Bloom conference in Quebec, Krushell asked gardeners in Eastern Canada about how the pesticide ban was working there. One Ontario parks and recreation official told her that the ban was a disaster. “They have all kinds of challenges with their fields,” Krushell says. “They can't use pesticides and herbicides, and they're looking at organic options. And a lot of the organic options just don't work. So what do you do when you don't have alternatives?”

What do you do? I'd say you put up with more weeds and dandelions. That isn't the end of the world.

The more significant issue is where to draw the line with any pesticide ban. Krushell quite rightly wonders what exactly would be classified as non-essential and essential for pesticide use.

For many in the anti-pesticide camp, the essential use of pesticides means only those things which are “medically required.”

This could be problematic, Krushell believes, because pesticides are used on mosquitoes, which are a nuisance in Edmonton, but spread no major diseases in this area. “But if you use that (medically-required) as your requirement, then mosquito spraying is no longer considered essential for the City of Edmonton,” Krushell says.

Krushell also wonders if pesticides to kill head lice would still be allowed.

Head lice plagues numerous schools. When a kid gets lice, it's hell. All the bedding in the house and much of the clothing has to be washed and super-heated in driers. To get rid of the little bugs, everyone in the house has to shampoo with an insecticide, then great diligence has to be taken with constant combing and inspection for days to make sure the problem is licked.

Not every family is up to the task of ridding a house of head lice. Some families also refuse to use insecticides, opting for organic solutions, which sometimes don't work. All this combines to mean that lice keep laying their eggs and the schools keep being highly efficient lice factories.

When things kept spiralling out of control at her own local school, Krushell checked with Alberta Health to see if something could be done, but was told the government could not intervene because head lice is just a pest, not a medical problem.

"That's my concern," Krushell says of any proposed pesticide ban. "How are you dealing with things like bed bugs and how are you dealing with head lice? Because even Alberta Health services is saying it's a pest, it's not medically required" to get rid of them.

I ask Dr. Raquel Feroe, a specialist in internal medicine and a strong anti-pesticide advocate, what kind of pesticide use she would like to see banned here.

"Personally, I would like to see no use for cosmetic purposes, such as treating broad leaf weeds in lawns. I think the tendency to do that is through over-marketing through the irresponsible pushing of herbicides."

As for insecticides for mosquitoes and head lice, she says she lacks expertise on the matter, but would follow the advice of experts in these areas.

Bans in other provinces have been put in place, then the details on what should or shouldn't be banned have been worked out later, Feroe says. This process has worked to reduce pesticide use, to educate people and no major terrible unintended consequences have come about.

My take? Like many on council, I'm not sure what to make of the conflicting opinions from expert doctors and researchers on either side of this issue.

In the long run, though, it's hard to imagine that the grave concerns over pesticide use of many credible health authorities, such as Feroe, aren't going to win the day. Fear and safety are the trump cards of public debate.

Rightly or wrongly, Edmonton city council will play it safe and do what more than 170 other city and town councils across Canada have done since 1991, and that's to ban the use of many pesticides and certainly those used for lawn care.

Before any ban is put in place, though, Krushell is right to focus on what is going to be banned and what isn't. More dandelions is a bother, but more head lice an utter and unacceptable hardship on families.

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