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## Pesticide ban is unwarranted

April 24, 2008

THE RECORD

The key to understanding the pointlessness of Ontario's pesticide ban lies in knowing who will be allowed to continue using these supposedly dangerous substances. Golf courses.

Premier Dalton McGuinty would have the public think the health and safety of Ontarians, particularly their children, depend upon ensuring that virtually everyone in the province stop spreading or spraying pesticides on their lawns and gardens. He's prepared to legislate this. He's prepared to enforce this.

But if the health risk from these chemicals is so proven and profound, if our vulnerable babies and toddlers are so at risk, why is McGuinty prepared to let some of the largest landowners in cities across Ontario -- golf courses -- continue using them?

It will, come next spring, be illegal for residents of Kitchener's Rockway neighbourhood to use pesticides in their yards. But why will Rockway Golf Course in the same neighbourhood be allowed to spray pesticides on their greens and fairways? And why will golf courses beside residential neighbourhoods from one end of the region to the other -- in Elmira, Conestogo, Waterloo's Grey Silo Golf Course, Westmount, Kitchener's Doon, Cambridge's Galt Country Club -- all be exempt from the chemical ban McGuinty argues is so essential? Are these chemicals dangerous or not?

The answer is obvious. This ban is about politics, not science. And it is driven by political desire and public fear, not reason.

Premier McGuinty either does know or should know that every blessed chemical his government plans to outlaw has been deemed safe for use by federal regulators in Canada and the United States. These bodies are the Pest Management Regulatory Agency, a branch of the federal government's Health Canada, and the Environmental Protection Agency in the U.S. Not so long ago, both regulators re-registered 2, 4-D, an active ingredient in many herbicides.

Despite this endorsement, Ontario intends to outlaw the use of 2,4-D for gardeners. Interestingly, the province's proposed legislation also exempts farmers, so someone growing a field of wheat will still be allowed to spray 2,4-D on it. How strange. Ontarians will be permitted to ingest what has been covered with 2-4 D but not walk on a lawn that has been treated with it. But the more you poke it, the more this proposed legislation is made of mental fluff.

Pesticides are, and without the need of Ontario's intervention, already highly regulated in this country. Some chemical formulations, such as the notorious DDT, are banned outright. No one can use them. Others are restricted and can only be used after someone is trained and given a permit. They are forbidden to the average citizen. Only some chemicals are ruled acceptable for general lawn and garden use. And here, Health Canada deems the risk to be minimal and acceptable if the chemicals are used properly.

The fact is, to accept the need for McGuinty's ban, you need to conclude that Health Canada has been hopelessly wrong and inept -- not just on one occasion but consistently and for decades. Some would argue it has. However, it's worth knowing that Health Canada has, in the past and based on newer research, removed some pesticides from the list available to the general population.

Every time Canadians buy a prescription drug, they place their faith in Health Canada, which regulates our pharmaceuticals. When they accept laws to limit exposure to cigarette smoke, Canadians do so because Health Canada found tobacco to be carcinogenic. And just last week, the federal government began a process that will probably lead to a ban on the chemical bisphenol A, which is used in some plastic bottles and as food liners. Why? Because Health Canada sounded the alarm. So explain the selective trust.

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For those who dismiss the wisdom and science of Health Canada, and there will be some, it is worth listening to Keith Solomon, director of the Centre for Toxicology at the University of Guelph. "There is no evidence to suggest a health risk from these chemicals," Solomon said bluntly of the substances McGuinty is banning. "This will not make any difference to the health of Ontarians." As for the ban itself, he is scathing: "It doesn't make sense because it is nonsensical."

To be sure, Solomon's is not the only informed opinion in this debate. However, he is a scientist who holds a PhD in pesticide toxicology and serves as secretary of the United Nations Environmental Effects Assessment Program, which advises the UN and member nations on climate change and ozone depletion. If his view is to be discarded, along with all the work and all the conclusions from Health Canada, the premier of this province and the people who support this ban should do a few things.

To begin, they should show the peer-reviewed, scientific studies that prove why every chemical they want banned should be illegal for the general public to use or buy. They should be able to demonstrate a health risk so significant and so serious for each and every chemical that only a ban will do. Then, the government should tell the public who first decided this radical approach was necessary.

Did the advice come from the province's own Pesticide Advisory Committee or from Liberal politicians eager to leap aboard the increasingly popular environmental bandwagon? On top of this they should clarify whether people growing fruits or vegetables in their yards, something increasingly in vogue in green circles, will be allowed to use chemicals to combat insect or fungus infestations.

Finally, the province should explain why golfers are immune to pesticides and can still tread safely on pesticide-laden ground.

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