

County's proposed pesticide ban draws questions and concerns

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ROCKVILLE – While some fear the negative health effects associated with pesticides, others say the science does not back up the claim.

The debate over synthetic pesticides has come to Montgomery County with County Council President George Leventhal's proposed ban on "non-essential" pesticides except for use on some weeds, invasive species, agriculture, gardens and golf courses.

It would also require posting notices upon spraying pesticides, an education plan and an Integrated Pest Management plan (IPM).

Leventhal backed the bill because of research in peer-reviewed journals showing links between children's exposure to pesticides and pediatric cancers, decreased cognitive functions and behavioral problems, in addition to risks for adults and pets. Leventhal also cited sources from the National Institutes of Health and American Academy of Pediatrics.

In order to accommodate all those who want to speak, Leventhal and Transportation, Infrastructure, Energy and Environment (T&E) committee chair Roger Berliner added a public hearing on Feb. 12 on top of the Jan. 15 hearing.

"We want Montgomery County to be the safest, cleanest, healthiest county in the United States of America and we're taking this on even though we understand that it is a new concept for a lot of people. We're going to take our time with it. We're not in a rush with it, but I do anticipate a very far-reaching piece of legislation during this calendar year," Leventhal (D-At large) said.

But some researchers and those in the industry said the government already regulates pesticides to make sure they are safe enough. The Environmental Protection Agency requires over 100 different studies and tests to ensure a "reasonable certainty of no harm" with use of pesticides.

"There is a lot of infrastructure behind their safe use and availability," said Karen Reardon, vice president of public affairs for the trade association Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment. "The products are highly regulated and would not be available in the marketplace as tools for professionals or consumers if they weren't safe."

Leventhal disagrees. In a memo he wrote to the council when he introduced the bill, he said the EPA's vetting is not foolproof.

"The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has found that many pesticides are currently being approved for consumer use by the EPA without receipt and review of

data that the manufacturer is required to provide on the safety of chemicals," he wrote. "As an educated populace, we like to think that we have a high bar for pesticide safety in this country, but sadly, when a pesticide has been approved by the EPA, it connotes little about its safety."

The bill's list of restricted, or non-essential, pesticides is based on EPA's classifications of carcinogenic to humans, likely carcinogenic to humans and restricted use as well as the more than 100 pesticides listed as Class 9 in Ontario's law and a category 1 endocrine disruptor by the European Commission.

On the other hand, studies that show correlations between exposure and negative health effects do not always take into account the causes of a disease, said Stuart Cohen, president of the firm Environmental and Turf Services.

For example, one study found an odds ratio greater than one for pesticides and soft tissue sarcomas, which would indicate someone is more likely to get those cancers than they would be otherwise. But the same study found odds ratios of less than one for pesticides and brain cancer or lymphomas, which would indicate exposure to the pesticides actually lowered the chance of getting those cancers. Cohen said it is unlikely pesticides would do that and there is more likely another confounding factor.

For Alex Stavitsky-Zeineddin, a member of the Safe Grow Montgomery coalition, there is no reason to risk even an association between exposure and negative effects. Stavitsky-Zeineddin joined the coalition after getting involved in her own community when a friend's son developed a rash after exposure to pesticides.

"If there is any research out there stating via exposure to these chemicals my sons have a greater risk of cancers or that my dog can or that I can, I don't see the value of having it around it all," she said. "The fact that there's a possibility is enough to say: why spray it?"

To lawn care professionals, the answer is clear: the substances are safe and when used properly make lawns and turf safer for everyone. Eric Wenger, president of Complete Lawn Care, serves about 1,000 mostly residential customers throughout the county. Wenger said grubs, which eat the roots of grass, can turn athletic fields into danger zones for players.

Wenger also said the industry does adapt to change, but accelerating it may not work when it comes to Integrated Pest Management, which already takes into account non-pesticide ways to keep lawns healthy. He said there are currently no truly effective alternatives to treating grubs.

"If you take away 95 percent of the toolbox that we use to get there, you pretty much take away IPM," he said. "We aren't just pro-pesticide because we want to use pesticides, we're pro-pesticide because we know they can be used safely and also they are the tools that are needed to do what we want successfully."

Kevin Fitzgerald, general manager of TruGreen, said he has never seen negative health effects in himself or his employees, who have worked in the field for decades.

"The county is taking a little bit of information and having an extremely emotional response to it," Fitzgerald said.

TruGreen serves about 12,000 residential customers throughout the county from their Gaithersburg location, according to Fitzgerald.

But proponents of the bill have seen safer alternatives to commonly used pesticides. The city of Takoma Park has a six-hour workshop for lawn care within their laws on Jan. 20 and has been doing outreach to business and homeowners, according to Nima Upadhyay, special projects coordinator for the city's department of public works.

Upadhyay said the city has not had any problems with implementation of the bill and have only had eight violations since it took effect. Upadhyay said she does not think implementation on a wider scale, like Montgomery County, would present any problems.

"I don't see it being a problem because I think it's just a process of adapting. I have been in conversations with our city gardener who has been doing organic lawn care (since before we passed the law)," she said. "Based on what I've seen I think it's a process of adapting to it rather than saying that we cannot do it because people are already doing it."

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