


Into the Weeds: Why Manitoba is Ditching its Pesticide Ban and What it Means for the Rest of Canada

Peter Shawn Taylor April 12, 2022

Are dandelions a blight on the landscape, or a lovely splash of yellow in an otherwise monotonous green landscape? In most parts of the country, this backyard debate was settled years ago – in favour of the weeds. With cosmetic pesticide bans in effect across a majority of provinces, it has become impossible for homeowners and local parks departments to defend their once-verdant lawns and outdoor spaces against weedy and unsightly invaders. Now, however, one province is bucking environmental fashion after taking heed of homeowners, municipalities and the federal agency charged with the safe regulation of chemical pesticides. Peter Shawn Taylor talks to advocates on both sides of the issue and wonders what it will take for all of Canada to enjoy a greener future.

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Troy Warkentin had a weedy budget problem. As chief administrative officer of the bucolic city of Steinbach, Manitoba, he was wrestling with the financial implications of the NDP government's impending provincewide ban on so-called "cosmetic" pesticides in 2014.

"Our city has traditionally prided itself on the high quality of our green spaces," Warkentin says in an interview. So how much would it cost to maintain Steinbach's pristine parks and streetscapes (<https://www.steinbach.ca/experience-steinbach/>) once the provincial ban took effect? Warkentin calculated that the city spent about \$15,000 a year on traditional, federally-approved herbicides. To get the same results using alternative products, based on manufacturers' specifications, Warkentin figured it would cost about \$240,000. "It was a 15-fold increase," he recalls.

Unwilling to blow its entire parks budget on weed control, Steinbach's city council told Warkentin to find a cheaper solution. As a result, the city currently spends about \$60,000 per year controlling weeds in its public spaces, including about \$29,000 worth of Fiesta, an iron-based herbicide allowed under the provincial ban, as well as more frequent mowing and maintenance meant to keep the weeds at bay. And how does the city look after the switch?

"The results of the new program are quite dismal," Warkentin states matter-of-factly. "The alternative chemicals we are now permitted to use are virtually ineffective. We've seen a significant increase in weeds throughout our green spaces and roadways, and in particular dandelions." Also up are complaints from Steinbach residents about their hometown's newer, shabbier look. Sighs Warkentin, "There's not much else the city can do."

Since 2003, when Quebec became the first province to ban “cosmetic” pesticides, there hasn’t been much that municipalities or homeowners in most parts of Canada can do to prevent dandelions or other weeds and bugs from taking over their beloved green spaces. Seven provinces, including Manitoba, currently impose a provincial ban on the use of weed-killing chemicals on most residential, public and commercial properties. The result is visible for all to see – a steady and sustained despoliation of some of this country’s most beautiful outdoor spaces.

Now, however, the yellow tide may finally be turning. Last month, in the face of overwhelming evidence that Manitobans are fed up with paying more for objectively uglier green spaces, the province announced it will repeal significant parts of its cosmetic pesticide ban, joining the three other western provinces of British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan in allowing the use of chemical pesticides. (While there is no provincial ban in B.C., many municipalities enforce their own local rules.) This spring all Canadians – particularly those in Ontario and eastward – should be paying close attention to the condition of Manitoba’s lawns.



Protecting Steinbach's much-loved parks and streetscapes from weeds and pests (top) proved a daunting budget task for Chief Administrative Officer Troy Warkentin (bottom).

Manitoba’s New Green Revolution

On March 14, Jeff Wharton, Manitoba’s Minister of Environment, Climate and Parks (<https://news.gov.mb.ca/news/index.html?item=53797&posted=2022-03-14>), announced upcoming legislative amendments to once again permit the sale of federally-approved chemicals to control weeds on lawns and streetscapes. “This will allow for an increase in usable green spaces,” Wharton predicted. He also introduced additional restrictions on the use of pesticides around picnic areas, playgrounds, dog parks and daycares to “protect sensitive areas for children and pets.”

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‘We are certainly happy with the province’s decision,’ Blight says. ‘Every single municipality across the province has seen their weed control costs skyrocket since 2014.’

🐦(<https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?text=%E2%80%98We+are+certainly+happy+with+the+province%E2%80%99s+de>

At a Legislature press conference, Wharton emphasized these changes were prompted by significant public dissatisfaction with the existing rules. “Stakeholders and members of the public raised several concerns about the original legislation,” he said, “including increased costs and...the lack of

effectiveness of current products on the market.” A provincial survey, he noted, revealed that 70 percent of respondents wanted the current pesticide law changed.



“An increase in usable green spaces”: In announcing the repeal of his province’s pesticide ban, Jeff Wharton, Manitoba’s Minister of Environment, Climate and Parks, (left) cited increased costs and public displeasure as reasons for the change; pictured on right, downtown Winnipeg.

Such a groundswell of opposition is no surprise to Kam Blight, president of the Association of Manitoba Municipalities (AMM), which encompasses all of Manitoba’s 137 municipalities including Winnipeg. “We are certainly happy with the province’s decision,” Blight says. “Every single municipality across the province has seen their weed control costs skyrocket since 2014.” Given the experience in Steinbach and elsewhere, out-of-control weed growth in public spaces has become “a nasty problem,” he remarks in an interview.

In addition to the disappointing look of lawns and roadways across the province, Blight points to some important practical and economic implications as well. When not acting as president of the AMM, Blight runs a native grass seed farm near Portage La Prairie. And from this perspective, he says the pesticide ban “has been very negative for the agricultural industry. When you consider how many roadways and parks border on farmland, weed control affects farmers as well. It’s been a massive issue.” With towns or cities no longer able to effectively kill weeds on their own green spaces, neighbouring farmers’ fields are also suffering as the weeds spread. Weed control is about more than just looks.

Another problematic aspect, according to Dave Hinton, chair of government relations for the Manitoba Nursery Landscape Association, lies in the provincial ban’s arbitrariness. Unlike other provinces that banned all use of cosmetic pesticides, Hinton points out that Manitoba only prohibited their application on lawns and grass; many not-quite-forbidden products are still sold in retail stores for use in gardens.

This legislative quirk placed chemical pesticides out of reach of lawncare companies, but left them available for use on lawns by homeowners prepared lie at their local hardware store about why they wanted the product, as a CBC-TV investigation revealed (<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/695606339807>). “It put the professionals at a disadvantage,” says Hinton, who owns Weedman lawncare franchises in Winnipeg and Brandon. He questions why trained employees should be prevented from using such products, but not untutored homeowners. “We’ve been fighting for seven years to get some common sense on this,” he snaps.



"A massive issue": Kam Blight, president of the Association of Manitoba Municipalities, (top) says the reversal of the pesticide ban will save municipal governments money and protect farmland from blowing weeds while Dave Hinton, chair of government relations for the Manitoba Nursery Landscape Association, (bottom) appreciates the common sense approach of the changes.

Discontentment over the ban has been building since the legislation took effect during the final term of Premier Greg Selinger's NDP government. His Progressive Conservative successor, Brian Pallister, announced a review of the legislation almost as soon as he won office in 2016 – then inexplicably sat on the file for nearly six years. The consultation process's results were never even publicly released until Wharton, a member of new Premier Heather Stefanson's cabinet, included them as a backgrounder to his announcement last month

(https://news.gov.mb.ca/asset_library/en/newslinks/2022/03/BG-EngageMB_Cosmetic_Pesticides.pdf).

While no reason was given for the long delay, it certainly wasn't due to a lack of clarity. Of more than 2,100 comments the government received in 2016 – the vast majority of which came from individuals, not businesses – fewer than 10 percent said they considered the law to be having a positive impact on the province. Over 1,400 respondents said the impact was negative. And 70

percent wanted the ban either scaled back or eliminated. It appears Manitoba's legion of dandelion-haters is large and loud.

What About the Children?

While news of the repeal appears to enjoy broad support throughout Manitoba, not everyone outside the province is pleased. Laura Bowman is a staff lawyer at Ecojustice, an environmental law charity based in Toronto formerly known as the Sierra Legal Defence Fund. Bowman's organization has participated in numerous legal challenges against pesticide use dating back to the first ban enacted in the town of Hudson, Quebec in 1991.

That case eventually made its way to the Supreme Court of Canada in 2001 (<https://scc-csc.lexum.com/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/1878/index.do>) and established the right of municipalities to set their own rules for pesticide use that ignore or supersede federal regulations. This crusade spread to



Ecojustice has been active for decades in the fight against cosmetic pesticide use at all levels of government, says staff lawyer Laura Bowman.

the provincial level when Quebec became the first to ban cosmetic pesticides in 2003. Relentless activist pressure over the ensuing decade motivated most other provinces to follow suit, including Ontario in 2008 and Manitoba in 2014.

“Since the early 2000s, there has been a big push to ban cosmetic pesticides at the federal, provincial and municipal levels,” Bowman observes. “And these bans have been quite effective at reducing pesticide use.” But now, she warns, “We are seeing the industry lobbying to roll back these pesticide bans *because* they were effective.” From Bowman’s perspective it is a manipulative pesticide industry, not a wide cross-section of homeowners, municipalities and businesses, that is behind Manitoba’s change in policy. As for the observation that homeowners themselves appear keen to use these products to beautify their own property, she dismisses the entire concept as pure frivolity: “I question the objective of creating these pristine green places where children can’t play.”



The fate of children looms large in the decades-long campaign against pesticide use. Supporters of repealing the ban in Manitoba, including Environment Minister Wharton, repeatedly point out that any pesticide allowed for use under the new rules must still pass a stringent assessment by the federal Pest Management Regulatory Agency (PMRA), an arm of Health Canada. Manitoba even added an extra layer of protection by continuing to ban pesticides in areas of high use by children, such as playgrounds and picnic areas.

Yet environmental groups such as Ecojustice remain wholly unsatisfied by federal regulation. “Pesticides are routinely approved where risks of concern to children and pregnant women are demonstrated,” states Bowman, who claims the PMRA does not sufficiently consider the specific



Kids will be kids: According to Bowman, Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency (PMRA) does not rigorously assess the pesticide risks for children and pregnant women, a charge the organization explicitly refutes. (Source of photo: Shutterstock)

ways in which children play in areas that might be sprayed with chemicals. "Kids are kids, they roll around in the grass, they eat dirt," she warns. "Relying on the federal system is not an adequate approach," she says, tugging strenuously on a parental sense of protectiveness.

Allegations that it ignores women and children when approving pesticides are common enough that

the FAQ section of Health Canada's website (<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/consumer-product-safety/pesticides-pest-management/frequently-asked-questions.html#isitsafe>) specifically responds to Bowman's assertion. It is a convincing counter-argument:

"Health Canada conducts specific risk assessments for sensitive groups including children and pregnant women, taking their unique physiological characteristics into account. The behaviours and play-habits of children, such as body weight and hand-to-mouth contact while playing near treated areas are considered when determining their potential exposure, and worst-case exposure scenarios are taken into account when determining application rates."

It seems the real issue in the debate over the safety of pesticides is not the competence of the 350 scientists working at the PMRA or whether a shadowy industry cabal is conspiring to influence public opinion about weeds and lawns and thus endanger the lives of our children. Rather, the crucial fact is that environmental groups such as Ecojustice have adopted a rigidly absolutist position on pesticides. In their view, all such chemicals are bad and must be banned. Full stop.

Such a doctrinaire approach is not only at odds with common sense, but also the PMRA's mandate. Its job is to assess the risks and rewards of individual chemicals in a modern and scientific manner. Where the risks associated with a particular pesticide are small and manageable and the benefits substantial, a product may be approved for use. The PMRA does not approve products proven to cause cancer or to be otherwise injurious to human health. And it conducts exhaustive reviews on previously approved products when new information comes to light.

No province or municipality has anything close to the PMRA's capability or expertise; it remains the country's pinnacle authority regardless of its critics' repeated criticisms. And as Hinton points out, most Canadians accept without complaint the federal government's role in approving chemicals for a wide range of other uses, from backyard pools and hot tubs to municipal water systems to the agricultural industry. Why should federal approval for backyard pesticides alone be controversial? "Society benefits from all these regulated chemicals," says Hinton.

One final curiosity of Ecojustice's position on the PMRA concerns the lack of effectiveness of alternative "low-risk" pesticides such as Fiesta. "Outside the landscaping industry, it's rare to hear complaints from people that things look terrible," Bowman claims. "People use Fiesta and it

controls the weeds.” Yet when confronted with evidence from Steinbach and elsewhere that these products are “virtually ineffective” in practice, Bowman leans heavily on the expertise of the PMRA for backing. “The federal regulator has approved these alternatives for effectiveness,” she says. “So, we know they’ve been tested to be efficacious.”

To recap: Ecojustice has no faith in the PMRA’s ability to properly test pesticides, *except* when it says Fiesta can be used to control the weeds on your lawn.

Making Gardening Harder

While it is popular to talk about the need to “trust the science” these days, this is certainly not the case with the PMRA. Its scientific efforts have been widely ignored across most of Canada since 2003 when the provinces began banning federally-approved pesticides. Sentiment, rather than science, appears to be the motivating factor. Yet Manitoba’s current plan suggests an outbreak of wisdom is still possible. Could such a thing catch on elsewhere? That depends on the willingness of homeowners and governments in other provinces to trust their eyes rather than their emotions.



*“Gardening is harder”: According to blogger Robert Parvis of Guelph, Ont., weeds are now more prevalent following the province’s 2008 ban on cosmetic pesticides, and there’s little anyone can do about them.
(Source of photo: gardenmyths.com)*

ban came into effect in 2008, Parvis observes that, “There are many more weeds on lawns and many more invasive species around. And legally people can’t do anything about it. It’s made gardening harder.”

Parvis does not favour the indiscriminate use of pesticides and worries about the impact overuse of chemicals may have on insect life and the overall health of an ecosystem. But his concern for the environment is backed by a practical appreciation for what works and what doesn’t. And he frets



The pinnacle authority in Canada: The PMRA employs over 350 scientists; no province or municipality can boast of similar expertise or experience in evaluating and regulating chemical pesticides.

Robert Parvis runs a popular gardening blog (<https://www.gardenmyths.com/>) based in Guelph, Ontario dispensing gardening advice backed by scientific rigour that boasts over 15 million cumulative visitors. He’s also written several books, including two on *Garden Myths* (<https://www.gardenmyths.com/garden-myths-book-1/>). Asked about the impact on the provincial landscape since Ontario’s pesticide

about the unintended consequences of sweeping regulatory edicts that rob gardeners and local governments of useful tools, especially when the judicious application of a “chemical” pesticide is the safest and most effective solution.

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Parvis pitted a clandestine supply of glyphosate-enabled Roundup against two popular homemade remedies of vinegar and salt in a weed-killing contest. The results were decisive.

🐦(<https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?text=Parvis+pitted+a+clandestine+supply+of+glyphosate-enabled+Roundup+aga>)

One of the effects of Ontario’s ban was a rebranding of many familiar commercial products in an attempt to disguise their newfound uselessness. The highly popular herbicide Roundup, for example, is now sold as Roundup Advanced. And while original version contained glyphosate, an effective and widely tested broadleaf and grass desiccant, the only active ingredient in Roundup Advanced is *vinegar*. Many familiar products having been neutered in this way, alongside entirely new product lines boasting healthy-sounded names like “Green” or “Eco” but precious few ingredients of any practical use. As a result, it has become commonplace for embattled gardeners to rely on homemade concoctions.

Parvis, who has an MSc. in biochemistry and enjoyed a long career as a laboratory software entrepreneur prior to offering gardening advice, decided to conduct his own scientific experiment to see how these workarounds stack up. On his website, he pitted a clandestine supply of glyphosate-enabled Roundup against the two popular kitchen-sink remedies of vinegar and salt in a dandelion-killing contest.

The results were decisive. “Vinegar doesn’t work,” Parvis states conclusively. “It will brown off the leaves of some plants, but it doesn’t kill the roots.” This suggests that most liquid weed killers legally sold in restricted markets such as Ontario are similarly ineffective. “Salt does work,” Parvis admits. “Since sodium is toxic to all plants. But it is also toxic to microbes in the soil. So it kills everything.” Only original Roundup performed as intended.



The evidence is in: On his blog, Parvis conducted an experiment comparing the weed-killing effectiveness of glyphosate-enabled Roundup (R) with a homemade salt solution (S) and pickling vinegar (V); after two months only Roundup had worked as intended. (Source of photo: gardenmyths.com)

Parvis thus has solid backing when he bristles at provincial legislation that permits the use of vinegar and salt but forbids the use of products that actually work. “Glyphosate is less toxic [to the ecosystem] than either vinegar or salt. But the government has made Roundup illegal. And there isn’t anything else to use,” he says. (In 2017 the PMRA conducted a “thorough scientific review (<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/news/2019/01/statement-from-health-canada-on-glyphosate.html>)” of glyphosate and declared that its continued use as a pesticide did not pose a

cancer or other health risk. That decision is currently being challenged in court by Ecojustice.) For this reason, Parvis calls a sweeping ban on all cosmetic pesticides, as is the case in most provinces, “a really stupid idea.”

Not only has Ontario robbed homeowners and gardeners of a useful tool, it has also unleashed a host of unintended consequences. One immediate outcome of the pesticide ban, Parvis observes, has been an increase in fertilizer use. “Now if you want to keep weeds out of your lawn, you have to grow better grass,” he says. That means using several big bags of fertilizer a year, all of which must be mined, processed, bagged and shipped. “We may have gotten rid of a small amount of pesticide, but we’ve replaced it with a bigger fertilizer industry with a huge carbon footprint.”

Of even greater concern has been the super-charged progress of European Buckthorn, an invasive, fast-growing shrub rapidly taking over large swaths of Ontario. “You see buckthorn everywhere in woods, meadows and hiking trails these days,” Parvis says. “It is showing up in gardens now too. And it’s next to impossible to get rid of.” Because it out-competes native species, the only way to conclusively eliminate buckthorn is to treat it with banned pesticides, something that is now impossible. “A very small amount of Roundup can kill it completely,” says Parvis, who worries that his 6-acre botanical garden will soon be overrun by the bush. In time, perhaps the entire province will suffer the same fate. “We are losing our native plants,” Parvis warns.

“That is a huge environmental negative for me.”

Runnin’ Back to Steinbach

With proof in hand that it is possible to roll-back a pesticide ban at the provincial level, several important benefits are worthy of note. First, it establishes that federalism is still an active force in Canada. It has become popular for all levels of governments to attempt to force their way into almost all conceivable policy areas – from cities declaring global climate emergencies to the federal government’s recent effort at running local housing policy. It now seems impossible to get politicians to stay in their own lanes and respect the hierarchy of the constitution.



“A huge environmental negative”: Without effective pesticides to kill it, Parvis worries that the invasive shrub European Buckthorn (top) will eventually take over the entire province; at bottom, city staff laboriously cut down buckthorn in Toronto’s High Park.

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It makes no sense to force taxpayers and municipalities to pay many times more for products that are ‘virtually ineffective.’ Permitting the safe use of cost-effective weed control tools saves money, enhances civic pride and helps farmers by reducing the spread of weeds onto farmland.

🐦(<https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?text=It+makes+no+sense+to+force+taxpayers+and+municipalities+to+pay+many>)

Manitoba’s decision to defer to the PMRA’s expertise is welcome evidence of a provincial government appropriately humble enough to accept federal scientific guidance in an area where it clearly lacks competence – yet also willing to exercise its political jurisdiction to make decisions reflecting the popular will rather than knuckling under to environmental activists and media pressure. Many other files could benefit from such a rational and balanced approach to policy-making.

Manitoba’s lead also demonstrates that environmental legislation does not have to move in only one direction – becoming ever-stricter and more absolute. We see such a trajectory throughout government policy these days, from relentless efforts to squeeze useful plastic products out of everyday life to continual increases in carbon taxes. Manitoba’s experience with pesticides clearly demonstrates that public opinion, scientific evidence and financial logic can serve as a necessary corrective to this ratchet-like effect.

Then there are the many practical implications. It makes no sense to force taxpayers and municipalities to pay many times more for products that are “virtually ineffective,” as Steinbach’s experience demonstrates. Permitting the safe use of cost-effective weed control tools saves money and enhances civic pride. It also benefits agriculture by reducing the spread of weeds onto farmland. Parvis’ warnings about unintended consequences must also be heeded. A single-minded focus on eliminating all “chemical” pesticides – and let’s not forget, vinegar and salt are also chemicals – can lead to much broader environmental damage through increased fertilizer use or a take-over by unwelcome invasive species.



While an absolutist approach to pesticides makes for nice slogans, such a policy ignores ample scientific evidence and the many aesthetic pleasures of a beautiful lawn and garden. (Source of bottom photo: Shutterstock)

All of this argues strongly against absolutist environmentalism. *Ban all pesticides!* may make for a great slogan. But implementing such a policy requires willful blindness to the impact on the real world. Good governance involves a careful scrutiny of costs *and* benefits. Any approach that focuses

exclusively on risks (often minuscule or entirely theoretical) and ignores a mountain of evidence proving the great usefulness of regulated pesticides is unscientific and frankly, irrational.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we must remember that there's great value in simply protecting the look of our lawns, flowerbeds, streetscapes, parks and other green spaces from weeds and other pests. While activists may deride such efforts as "cosmetic" – in the sense of being frivolous or unnecessary – this ignores the vital poetry of everyday life. A lush carpet of green grass holds universal appeal for both practical and aesthetic reasons. It invites participation, pleases the senses and touches the soul. It creates an oasis of peace and in so doing provides a moment of grace in our chaotic world. And if such sublimity can be achieved with the safe and judicious application of modern chemistry, why should anyone object?

Beauty has no need to defend herself.

Peter Shawn Taylor is senior features editor of C2C Journal. He lives in Waterloo, Ontario and is looking forward to the arrival of spring.

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