

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Government Regulations: Canada's Chemical Ban: Could it Happen Here?

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Last year, legislators in Ontario enacted new regulations that banned the use of 82 pesticide ingredients and more than 290 products containing these chemicals for cosmetic purposes. Since then, special interest groups and environmentalists have continued to pressure other Canadian provinces to support similar regulations, including a fertilizer/herbicide ban in Alberta.

Supporters of the ban argue that pesticides are associated with serious illnesses, including cancer, and prohibiting them protects humans and animals. Those fighting to protect lawn & garden chemicals say there's no concrete scientific evidence linking the proper use of these products with any diseases, and that these anti-chemical organizations are using emotional

appeals to garner support.

While the debate rages on in Canada, agriculture and horticulture watchdogs south of the border are starting to wonder if we'll soon be facing the same fight.

The players

Since 2002, environmental groups have lobbied hard in Canada for the ban of pesticides, fertilizers and herbicides. The city of Quebec was the first to ban the use and sale of 20 ingredients in lawn pesticides in 2003. In April 2009, the province of Ontario enacted the toughest ban in Canada, prohibiting the use of pesticides for residential and community landscapes. Commercial growers and farmers are exempt from the ban; however, garden centers and large retailers had to pull pesticides deemed for "cosmetic" use from their shelves. Pesticides will still be used for mosquito control, and golf courses can use them if they follow specific requirements.

Worse still, on January 1, 2010, Alberta enacted a ban on fertilizer/herbicide products, commonly referred to as “weed and feed” products. Tim Giese, chairman of the Cochrane Environmental Action Committee, an environmental group, told AgroNews that the group has been working toward the prohibition of weed and feed for some time, and that the idea of having a weed-free lawn and garden has brainwashed people into thinking that weeds are bad.

Now, 18 health and environmental groups have joined together to set their sights forcing similar bans in British Columbia.

“We want the legislation that meets or beats the strongest protections in place in other provinces,” Barbara Kaminsky of the Canadian Cancer Society said in a press release. “B.C.’s current approach is inadequate because it continues to allow the use of pesticides to improve the appearance of lawns and gardens. B.C. has an opportunity to demonstrate national leadership by adopting the strongest cosmetic pesticide ban in Canada.”

Proof vs. “Precautionary Principle”

At the heart of the controversy is science. Environmentalists and some health officials say there’s a “body of evidence” that shows a positive association between exposure to pesticides and certain types of cancer. However, government agencies such as Health Canada and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have said that there is no scientific proof that garden pesticides expose humans and animals to high risks.

Opposers of the bans have made it clear that it’s not a question of being “pro-pesticide,” but that it’s about responsible pesticide use. Eleanor Renaud, director of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA), said in a column in *Greenhouse Canada* that environmentalists should focus on educating consumers and landscapers about proper usage of approved products instead of passing a complete ban. “It seems that Ontario knows better than the 350 scientists at Health Canada dedicated to the evaluation of pesticides,” she said.

Dean M. Stanbridge, a world-renown international environmental consultant, was honored by the EPA in 2004 for advocating reduced pesticide methods in pest management. As an Ontario resident and expert on pesticides, Mr. Stanbridge took exception to the bans because of insufficient scientific research. In a letter to the *Canadian Champion* newspaper, Mr. Stanbridge stated, “Although I agree that steps needed to be taken to address the use of ‘cosmetic’ pesticides, it’s a sad state of affairs when science and common sense were pushed aside by scare tactics and emotion. This ban will have far reaching consequences that include documented increases to disease and reduced public health. I’m deeply disappointed to know that our Federal Constitution can be so easily disregarded and that an entire layer of government, including hundreds of scientists’ testing, can be ignored by pure emotion and misinformation.”

How could such legislation, without concrete evidence of the negative effects on people and the environment, be allowed to pass? Bob Dolibois, executive vice president of the American Nursery & Landscape Association and *GrowerTalks* columnist, said it was because of what’s known as a “precautionary principle.”

“It operates under the premise of where there’s smoke, we need to assume there’s fire,” Bob says. “In a nutshell, the thinking is that there is a fear there, and the hard science is not really convincing or settled. It

would probably be more accurate to describe this as more of a social issue than a scientific issue.”

The effects of the bans

Many feel that the special-interest groups working to enact these bans are only concerned with their own agenda and not about the people who are directly affected by them. The OFA believes that people will start to see a dramatic change in the appearance of public spaces and that cities that take pride in their parks and landscapes will have to figure out a way to keep weeds and pests out ... on their own dime.

Karen Reardon, director of communication for the U.S organization RISE (Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment), said that their partner in Canada has reported a significant increase in allergies and Lyme disease. Also, because sidewalks and medians are so overrun with weeds, fire rescue departments are having a hard time finding fire hydrants.

Since these bans are still relatively new, it's hard to pinpoint the impact they're having, says Pam Charbonneau, turfgrass specialist for the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food & Rural Affairs. But one trend she has noted is how industry is working to fill the gaps in pest control products.

“If there are a lot of pests in the landscape causing you to lose your plants, it does create more demand to eradicate the problem,” she says. “I think on the positive side of things, a lot of people in the turf and landscape industries have seen a surge in new products that fill the gap left by the pesticide ban. I was a little bit skeptical in the beginning that we wouldn't get anything to replace the products we had before, but it's interesting to see companies try to come up with new products because they see that there's money to be made.”

Could it happen here?

Here in the United States, we're already seeing anti-pesticide groups rattling the cages of politicians.

“I don't think special interest groups look at country borders, they look at issues,” Pam Charbonneau says.

However, unlike in Canada, it may be more difficult for activists to push their agenda through in the states.

For one thing, the Canadian bans started at the municipal level before the province-wide ban was enacted. In the U.S., only the state and federal government can set laws, not individual communities. Supporters of the bans will have a harder time convincing high-level politicians to pass these regulations.

Another hurdle is whether government officials feel the bans are even necessary. This past February, the New Hampshire state legislature was the first to look at proposing a ban on cosmetic pesticides that was brought before it. The proposal was subsequently tabled, because many of the lawmakers are reluctant to sit through long hearings and deal with lawsuits from the chemical industry. One House official was quoted as saying, “Listen, I support this, but I'm already on too many committees. We just don't have the time.”

Still, the failed proposal in New Hampshire doesn't mean we won't be hearing about more anti-pesticide bills; special interest groups won't stop chipping away at this issue until their dream of a chemical-free Utopia is achieved. But with the work and support of the agriculture community and organizations such as RISE, science and rational thought will prevail in state and federal capitols.

Says, ANLA's Bob Dolibois, "A total cut-off of pesticides on paper looks great, but the reality is that we would not be able to feed the world in partnership with nature if we were in a zero pesticide base. We have to see the trade off. To eliminate pesticides completely is to produce a different outcome to what most people in the marketplace are willing to tolerate."

Right now, growers and farmers are not affected by the pesticide bans, but Bob says these regulations affect the entire supply chain, from grower all the way to consumer. "I think that everyone believes that a defect-free plant is a better sale and can generate a higher price than something that's riddled with holes from insect damage," he says. "Everyone has a vested interest in that. Growers should be knowledgeable about these issues and be able to talk to their customers about it."

"[Growers] absolutely should care because these activist groups who are advancing these policies are never satisfied," RISE's Karen Reardon says adamantly. "They'll be right back in the next round to get the next category of product user. They've been very effective having these products taken from consumers, so certainly, their next pass is going to be at those professionals who use them." **GT**