THE NATIONAL COALITION FOR PESTICIDE-FREE LAWNS

NATIONAL PRESS CONFERENCE CALL

"THE DANGERS OF AND ALTERNATIVES TO CHEMICAL LAWN PESTICIDES"

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Transcript by:
Federal News Service
Washington, D.C.

OPERATOR: Good afternoon. My name is Phyllis and I will be your conference facilitator. At this time I would like to welcome everyone to the Poison-Free Lawns conference call. All lines have been placed on mute to prevent any background noise. After the speakers' remarks, there will be a question and answer period. If you would like to ask a question during this time, simply press star then the number 1 on your telephone keypad. If you would like to withdraw your question, press star then the number 2 on your telephone keypad. Thank you.

I would now like to turn the call over to Ms. Shawnee Hoover, special projects director at Beyond Pesticides.

Ma'am, you may begin your conference.

SHAWNEE HOOVER: Thank you. Thank you to everyone who is joining us today with the National Coalition for Pesticide-Free Lawns. I first want to give permission to all reporters who would like to record this call.

Today we have medical and scientific experts who will be discussing the dangers and alternatives of lawn pesticides and we'll be talking about the dangers that the pesticides can pose to children, pets and wildlife and the economic and aesthetic feasibility for both homeowners and landscapers of creating non-toxic lawns and landscapes.

The National Coalition for Pesticide-Free lawns is a growing popular movement of consumer and environmental groups, and we have called on Home Depot and Lowes Home Improvement, two of the major home and garden retailers in the United Sates, to carry a full range of organic non-toxic lawn care products and to reconsider the sale of weed and feed products that contain the chemical 24D due to its hazards and environmental pollution.

Recent surveys have shown almost half of all households buying lawn care products are seeking to buy non-toxic alternatives. The letter to Home Depot follows on the heels of a new million-dollar public relations campaign by the lawn chemical industry, the public interest groups, such as ourselves, that we say are misleading consumers and landscapers on the need for toxic pesticides.

So in the conference today we would like to start with Dr. Warren Porter. Dr. Porter is a professor of zoology and environmental toxicology at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and he has been since 1986. His work has been featured in science magazines and published in peer review journals, including Toxicology and Industrial Health, and Environmental Health Perspectives.

Dr. Porter?

WARREN PORTER: Hey, Shawnee, thank you. I'm just going to comment briefly on some of the research that we have done recently where we bought one of the most commonly used lawn chemical mixtures right off the shelves of a local store instead of buying ultra-pure active ingredients, which is what EPA registers.

We found that the mixture, at miniscule amounts well below what is considered safe by the EPA, could induce abortions and resorptions of fetuses in mice. And of particular importance was that the greatest effects were at the lowest doses, suggesting some sort of an endocrine-disrupting mechanism.

I also want to point out that inverse dose effects of pesticides have been demonstrated for learning and immune responses by Levin in 2002 and Olson and his group in 1987, which was our group.

Finally, we have also shown that mixtures of common herbicides and fertilizers found in groundwater can change aggression levels, learning abilities, hormone levels and immune function in rats and mice.

I'll just leave it at that for the moment.

MS. HOOVER: Thank you, Dr. Porter.

Next we're going to hear from Dr. Routt Reigart. Dr. Reigart is a professor of pediatrics at the Southern Carolina Medical University. He is the past chair of the Environmental Protection Agency's Children and Environmental Health Protection program, and a former chair committee on the Environmental Health American Academy of Pediatrics.

Dr. Reigart?

DR. ROUTT REIGART: Thank you, Shawnee. I have some particular concerns about children, for several reasons, beginning with the fact that children are often more exposed than adults to pesticides because their behavior and small size puts them in a risk zone near the ground and because they breathe, ingest and absorb from the skin more pesticide for their size than do adults.

The medical community, over many years, has traditionally not been well trained in identifying the symptoms of environmental exposure to chemicals such as pesticide, and as a result, poisonings and symptoms of exposure to pesticides may often go misdiagnosed or unrecognized by these doctors.

There are conditions clearly related to environmental risk, such as asthma, and as everyone knows, asthma rates have risen dramatically in recent decades in children. Learning disabilities such as attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity in children have also shown dramatic increases, and many believe that these may also be related to

environmental exposures. While we do not know the exact mechanism for these potential effects, we are chasing after it very aggressively.

There is increasing evidence exposure to pesticides and other toxic chemicals may be a strong contributor to these rises. My concern at this point is that lawn chemicals are an important and unnecessary source of exposures to pesticides and other chemicals.

Thank you, Shawnee.

MS. HOOVER: Thank you.

Now we will hear from Steven Zien. Steven holds a degree in social science from the University of Wisconsin. He is a 30-year veteran of organic horticulture. He has a regular column in the Sacramento Bee, and has for 20 years. He's been featured in Organic Gardening magazine, National Gardening magazine, and Fine Gardening magazine, as well as others, and is editor of the Biological Urban Gardening Services flyer, which is a publication geared towards landscape professionals.

Steven?

STEVEN ZIEN: Thank you, Shawnee.

In my 30 years in the landscape industry, I have seen the demand for organic landscape care soar. The nursery industry has worked hard to meet the growing demands with a multitude of organic horticultural products, yet the landscape industry has been reluctant to capitalize on this relatively untapped and growing market.

Environmentally sound landscapes utilize organic fertilizers that nourish a multitude of beneficial organisms that make up the living soil. It is this living soil that creates healthy plants that are better able to resist weeds, insects and diseases, deceasing or eliminating the need for pesticides. Synthetic fertilizers destroy this living soil, creating an unproductive ground. Plants become susceptible to pest attack, often increasing the need for use of pesticides. Nutrients and organic fertilizers are held strongly in the soil while those from synthetic fertilizers are highly susceptible to leaching and runoff that contaminate local waterways.

The landscape industry now has a golden opportunity to fulfill the demands of this ever-expanding market by offering science-based natural, organic horticultural services that provide people with beautiful green lawns and landscapes that are safe for children, pets and the environment.

As a long-time organic landscape professional, I can assure you that a switch from chemical-intensive lawn care to organic lawn care is the future of the landscape industry. It will benefit human health, the environment, and the financial viability of the industry itself.

Shawnee?

MS. HOOVER: Thank you, Steven.

Now we will turn to Dr. Steve Sheffield. He holds a Ph.D. in wildlife toxicology and is with Virginia Tech.

Steve?

STEVEN SHEFFIELD: Thanks, Shawnee.

Lawn chemicals pose a concern for the health of pets, especially dogs. Studies have found that dogs have less ability to detoxify chemicals commonly found in lawn pesticide formulations than other mammals tested, which results in increased toxicity.

A recent study found that certain types of dogs, for example, who are exposed to pesticide-treated lawns and gardens, increase their risk of bladder cancer four to seven times.

With mammals we need to be more concerned with looking at sub-lethal effects, those effects that do not result in rapid death but instead result in debilitating impacts on one or more internal systems in an animal.

My own research with small mammals has shown that exposure to recommended label rates of lawn products such as diazinon cause very subtle sub-lethal effects that would be virtually impossible to detect without looking very carefully for them. Exposure to low levels of diazinon was found to cause small mammals to virtually shut down their reproduction during peak breeding season, cause altered behavior, hypothermia and decreased nervous system function. It also caused decreased immuno-competence in bobwhite quail exposed as embryos inside their eggshells.

So dead animals have been the popular standard by which impacts are measured, but sub-lethal affects may be even more important in terms of looking at overall impact on wildlife populations.

Now, as far as the bigger picture, the continued use of lawn chemicals alters an already highly altered or otherwise stressed urban/suburban ecosystem, which could have potential far-reaching implications for humans and wildlife populations. For example, recent research has found that amphibians are impacted by fairly low levels of herbicides such as atrazine and glyphosate, or Roundup. In urban/suburban areas, amphibians live in storm water ditches and other pools and ponds, and when it rains, pesticide runoff from lawns ends up in these ditches with potentially harmful results.

These same urban water bodies where amphibians live also provide a valuable drinking water source for other urban species such as bats and birds. Research has found that both bats and birds are also extremely sensitive to pesticide exposure. The long-term

effects of this continued level of exposure of lawn chemicals on urban/suburban wildlife is not yet known. However, it is known that these organisms, whether it be small mammals, amphibians, bats, birds or invertebrates such as bees and butterflies are essential components to the proper functioning of all ecosystems, even the highly altered urban/suburban ecosystems.

Shawnee?

MS. HOOVER: Thank you. I just want to add that Dr. Sheffield holds his post-doctorate through the Environmental Protection Agency and his Ph.D. in environmental toxicology and zoology from the Oklahoma State University. He has published 52 papers in peer-reviewed journals, including Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry and Environmental Health Perspectives. I just wanted to make sure I got that full intro there.

And lastly I just wanted to say that for us at Beyond Pesticides we feel that science and society have really come a long way. The debate is no longer about using pesticides safely but really about not having to use pesticides at all. The National Coalition for Pesticide-Free Lawns has come together to put forth a united voice on behalf of the public, whom our organizations represent, and more and more the public is finding it increasingly unjustified to be exposed to potentially harmful pesticides when that exposure is purely for aesthetic purposes and neither voluntary nor necessary.

So now, on that note, I would like to turn it over to Jay Feldman. He is the founder and executive director of Beyond Pesticides. Jay has been working on pesticide education and reform for over 25 years. He hold a degree in urban regional policy and planning from Virginia Poly Tech, and he is the author of numerous articles and is regularly featured in the media and trade magazines, and has testified numerously before Congress and state legislatures.

Jay?

JAY FELDMAN: Thank you, Shawnee.

I think the keyword today is “unnecessary risk,” or “unnecessary hazards” associated with these chemicals. I’d like to draw your attention to a number of fact sheets that are on the website, pesticidefreelawns.org, and in particular the 30 commonly used lawn chemicals. In our analysis we find that 14 can cause cancer; 18, reproductive effects; 18, neurotoxic damage; 20, liver and kidney damage. One product label even reads that, “Repeated exposure may make a person more susceptible to the effects of this and related chemicals.”

When we look at the environmental impacts of these same 30 commonly-used pesticides on lawns, we find 17 of the most commonly used ones have been found in groundwater: 23 are known to leach, 11 are toxic to birds, 28 are toxic to fish and aquatic organism, 11 are toxic to bees.

These chemicals represent secondhand pollution, causing involuntary exposure and contamination that cannot be contained to the site to which they are applied. The problem in this context in particular is that the EPA registration process is limited and deficient in a number of areas. First of all, testing is incomplete. The law allows for many of the hazards, which I've just cited among the 30 most commonly used pesticides on lawns. Children are not protected. And some of the most hazardous ingredients, considered trade secret, are not actually disclosed on the product label. In fact, as Dr. Porter pointed out earlier, EPA does not test the full product formulation.

So the product on the shelf is not fully evaluated and the product ingredients are not fully disclosed. As a result of this situation, the pesticide product label does not adequately protect the user or those exposed to these products. Therefore, EPA's advice, which is essentially a safety message, to follow the label, is not adequately protective of public health.

Let me for a moment put this into a political context. We believe that communities should immediately act to stop the unnecessary use of lawn and landscape pesticides in their communities on both public and private lands. Because of the secondhand contamination and poisoning and given the availability and viability of alternatives that you've heard about today, we believe we can act now.

Where the chemical industry has successfully thwarted the democratic right of communities to stop the use of these what we often call aesthetic or cosmetic uses of pesticides by preempting or taking away the authority of localities, states should repeal these laws and return the democratic process to protect community health and welfare to localities.

Finally, our advice to consumers: next time you're approached by a chemical lawn care company or go into one of the stores, the retailers selling these products, tell them you're going organic.

Thank you, Shawnee.

MS. HOOVER: Thank you, Jay.

Now we would like to open it up for questions and answers.

OPERATOR: At this time I would like to remind everyone, if you would like to ask a question, press star then the number 1 on your telephone key pad. We'll pause for just a moment to compile the Q&A roster. (Pause.)

Your first question comes from Russell Dinage (ph) of Pesticides and Toxic Chemicals.

Q: Hello. Thank you very much for holding this conference today. The first question I have is long-term, what are the lobbying objectives for both organizations, Beyond Pesticides and Defenders of Wildlife in this initiative?

MR. FELDMAN: This is Jay. I'm assuming everyone can hear me. Most of the focus currently as contained in the declaration, which you also can get on the website, is focused on state and local policy and marketplace practices. First of al, certainly the kind of scientific information that is both in the literature and you've heard summarized here today really will and should move consumers to look for alternatives in the marketplace. And as Steven Zien, I think, said very clearly that the viability of these alternatives are there so part of our job as a coalition is to get this message out so that companies are able to deliver these services that demand increases and et cetera.

Secondly, the big focus right now is on state policy. States have historically regulated pesticides and often gone beyond the restrictions that are imposed under our federal pesticides law. I think what we've documented both through the website and again numerous articles document the inadequacies of EPA's regulatory review process. So one of the key strategies here is to protect and then insure the rights of local government to regulate pesticides. As you know, in Canada, at least 70 jurisdictions have adopted bylaws which, for the most part, ban the aesthetic use of chemicals on lawns and landscape. And a similar movement is being developed and developing in the United States, and our hope is, with this National Coalition for Pesticide-Free Lawns, we can help nurture that process.

Q: Thank you. Will there be any ads in the news media in the near future about this issue?

MR. : Unfortunately, we're not prepared today to disclose the advertisement strategy, but certainly we are going to use all the mechanisms available to us to get this message out as broadly as possible.

Q: Is there any future legislation planned in the immediate future?

MR. : In terms of federal legislation?

Q: Yeah.

MR. : Yeah. Not right now, no.

Q: Will there be any consumer –

MS. HOOVER: We need to open it up for other questions as well.

MR. : Okay, so one more question. Sorry.

Q: Yeah, sorry. Will there be any consumer education campaigns in the future at all?

MR. : Yes, this whole effort – and especially the scientific and medical information that is currently available and is widely seen in the scientific literature will be a part of consumer information that needs to go out more widely.

MS. : And I would just like to add that this entire campaign really is a consumer – yeah, it's a consumer-based, it's a person, individual, community-based campaign.

Q: Okay, just one last question. Will more retail outlets be petitioned in the near future in addition to Home Depot and Lowe's Home Improvement?

MS. HOOVER: I don't think we're prepared at this time to talk about that either.

MR. : Our focus at this point is on the big sales, large distributors of these products.

MS. HOOVER: And we're really hoping to get, you know, positive response from them. And they really are leaders in this areas, I mean, in the home and garden sector I should say – not in this area.

MR. : And partly what we're trying to do now – and we to open this up to more questions – but partly what we believe is important now is a dialogue with those who interact with the public, sell products that are potentially harmful, and could increase the availability of products that are viewed as or defined as organic and viewed as safer material.

OPERATOR: Again, if you would like to ask a question, please press star, then the number one on your telephone keypad. Your next question comes from Graham Johnston of Columbian Missourian.

Q: Hello, my question is, what does anyone believe the hesitation is on the part of the industry to switch over to organic from these chemicals?

MS. HOOVER: That's a good question.

STEVEN ZIEN: Yeah, this is Steve Zien. I think one of the things is that, you know, they've been told – you know, the industry members have been told for years and years and years by all of their suppliers, by most of the agricultural universities that organics don't work. And there is not an abundance of scientific research, although there is some showing that organics do work. And everybody who they're buying from – they're buying from major dealers, distributors to get the best price. And they are only dealing with the chemical materials, and they don't want to lose that business. And so I think that, you know, they're not getting the education that they need, although it's

starting to come around. But they're also afraid to try things that they haven't, you know, utilized. The chemical programs create, you know, green lawns and landscapes. I'll say it also creates unhealthy green lawn and landscapes that make them susceptible to pests, and then they have to come through with pesticides. But it, you know – I think the industry is slowly coming around. There are various industry organizations that are trying to promote organic landscape care, and the interest is growing. I'm a member of the Ecological Landscape Working Group here in the Sacramento area, and we've put on two tradeshows over the last two years. And the interest has – and this is or professionals in the landscape industry – and the interest is absolutely phenomenal. The members that came in to participate in our tradeshow grew from about 25 to 40 so the interest is growing.

MS. HOOVER: I would just like to add that the coalition makes a very clear distinction between those who manufacture pesticides and chemicals from the landscape industry. So not to be confused, when we say industry – like Steven just now is talking about the landscaping industry. So we specify usually to describe when we're talking about the lawn chemical industry versus the landscaping industry because we do not feel that actually their interests are one and the same, although we believe that the information that's actually put out there by the lawn chemical industry is trying to convince landscapers that their interests are identical. And we disagree with that.

Q: Thank you.

OPERATOR: At this time there are no further questions.

MS. HOOVER: Would anyone like to add any last further comments?

OPERATOR: Excuse me, you do have a question from Roger Stanley of Lawn and Landscape Management.

Q: Yeah, this is Roger Stanley. And my question is, I have an open invitation to manufacturers' organic products to share with us and our readers their efficacy data because that is important in the industry. So I'm curious what the coalition is doing to encourage manufacturers or suppliers of organic products to provide that data.

MR. ZIEN: Well, one comment in reference to that, and this is Steve Zien again. Most of the companies that are producing the organic materials are very, very small companies. They don't have a whole lot of money to put into efficacy data, excuse me. And so it's real hard for them to provide that kind of information. They don't have the multimillion-dollar resources that Monsanto and the other aid other chemical industries have. But –

MS. HOOVER: Also, yeah, just to add to that – there is a lot of information that's coming through through the organics program in agriculture, such as the efficacy of compost tea and other forms of non-toxic or natural products. So there needs to be more crossover between organic standards board and what's going on in organic agriculture

into the urban and suburban landscape industry. So we will be encouraging that kind of crossover.

MR. : It should be noted this is a good question that the registration process for pesticides really does not at the front end evaluate efficacy. The EPA essentially waves the disclosure of this information and actually the submission of this information to the agency, although EPA does have the authority to request it. And many manufacturers tell us that they do carry out efficacy reviews. I'm talking about the chemical industry at this point. And so since EPA does not evaluate efficacy unless there are exceedingly high hazards identified or risks identified, the consumer is really left to the marketplace, whether we're talking about chemical or organic products, to determine for him- or herself whether a particular product will perform as it is advertised to or intended to. This is a problem. We don't have third party review of any products that are on the market to make an independent judgment as to whether these chemicals will perform, not only perform in year one, but perform in the out years when, as Steven said earlier, we see resistance building in pest populations.

So this whole area of efficacy and efficacy review by third parties is an area in which consumers are not well served. It's particularly problematic in this particular area – lawn care – where we are using products that have known hazards. And, you know, we don't know whether they do the job they're supposed to do, but we do know from an experiential database that alternatives, composting, various seed varieties, various cultural practices, dethatching, aeration, watering, different techniques do manage lawns adequately and meet consumer standards. So I think whether we're talking about organic or chemical or chemical, to adequately serve the consumer, we need a much more rigorous regulatory review process that evaluates efficacy claims across the board.

OPERATOR: At this time there are no further questions. Are there any closing remarks?

MS. HOOVER: Well, I would just like to say thank you for joining us and for participating in this press conference of the National Coalition for Pesticide-Free Lawns, Beyond Pesticides, and Defenders of Wildlife. If any of you would like more information, you can of course go to the pressroom at www.pesticidefreelawns.org or for more in depth interviews with any of the speakers or for more further information at all, please feel free to give me a call. My name is Shawnee Hoover. I'm at (202) 543-5450, for e-mail, at shoover – S-H-O-O-V-E-R – at beyondpesticides.org. Thank you. Thank you to the speakers.

MR. : Thank you all.

MR. : You're quite welcome.

MS. HOOVER: Bye.

OPERATOR: This concludes today's poison-free lawns conference call you may now disconnect.

(END)