

Communities Act as Health and Environmental Threats Escalate

As the complexity of chemical interactions in the environment and their effect on living organisms explodes, we are in a period of diminishing regulation. So, we turn to local decision makers—whether in households or on farms, school or park districts, or local governments—to consider the threats of pesticides and make the decision to eliminate their use.

In this issue of *Pesticides and You*, we highlight a science piece published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science about the effect of a fungicide on organisms well beyond its target, a fungus. The article reports, “The ability of [the fungicide] fludioxonil, to act on a sugar-metabolizing enzyme common to all cells, and to produce the damaging compound methylglyoxal, may mean that the pesticide has more potential to harm non-fungal cells than previously thought.” This pesticide’s original use on stored seeds expanded to grains, vegetables, fruits, ornamental plants, and then to produce to extend shelf life after harvesting, all without full understanding or acknowledgment of its widely destructive effect.

With this, we again call for, in our communities and in all policy reform efforts, the adoption of the precautionary principle, the implementation of organic practices and products as the default in land and building management, and the end to this massive testing of pesticides on people and the environment by the chemical industry.

EPA, in February, announced that it is reapproving the weed killer glyphosate/Roundup despite the evidence of threats of cancer and DNA damage. Same for the neonicotinoid insecticides that are indiscriminately killing pollinators, polluting waterways, and killing keystone aquatic species. Good science is no longer integral to federal and most state regulatory decisions, which rely on EPA.

Approaching Reform with Alternatives

When we advance reform, we do not want to just tinker with a failed risk assessment-based regulatory system—with scaled backed improvements to enforcement, taking a few bad pesticides out of use, or improving mitigation measures for farmworker and farmer protection in excessively dangerous working conditions. We want to eliminate the use of these toxic materials, starting from the ground up. This means that we, as a part of our decision making process—whether in a community or a federal law—must look at whole ecological and biological systems, the range of interactions that are possible, and reject any harm. With alternatives available, there is no reason to accept anything less. This may leave a very small opportunity for use in public health emergencies. Integral to reform, then, is an alternatives analysis at the time a pesticide registered.

This is not a new position for Beyond Pesticides. It is why we began pushing for organic in 1981 when we were founded, creating the foundation for the change urgently needed in our communities and nation. We do not have time to tinker, accept half-measures, or reject precaution as a matter of policy and practice.

Aggressively Advancing Organic

The importance of organic cannot be overstated. As major corporations see market opportunities, we cannot accept the weakening of the original organic law’s rigorous process, as is happening more and more. We will hold groups that waver, either by their words or their silence, accountable to the tough standards that birthed the burgeoning organic sector, as we did in a recent OrganicEye release on new appointees to the National Organic Standards Board. When the Organic Trade Association, representing the largest food and agribusiness operations, or other groups equivocate or are silent (and therefore complicit) on issues that challenge organic values, principles, and law, we have a duty to call it out. Whether it is support for “organic” hydroponics or USDA eliminating the default sunset (removing) of synthetics in organic production, we have a duty to call it out. We must protect the integrity of organic as the solution to pollution, as we confront the climate crisis and dramatic declines in biodiversity.

Local Action Leads the Way

Meanwhile, the work to eliminate pesticide use in communities is inspiring. In January, we testified before the Committee on Health in the New York City Council on legislation to remove toxic pesticides from public parks and playing fields. We told the committee that, “[W]e need to eliminate hazardous materials, not with chemical-by-chemical bans, but with a comprehensive program for land management that adequately restricts all pesticides.”

Got Science?

Finally, this was reported in a January 1, 2020 front page *New York Times* piece, “A top panel of government-appointed scientists [Science Advisory Board], many of them handpicked by the Trump administration, said . . . that three of President Trump’s most far-reaching and scrutinized proposals to weaken major environmental regulations are at odds with established science.”

We are plowing ahead.

Jay Feldman,
executive director of
Beyond Pesticides

