

# What's the Chemical Lawn Care Industry Up To?

The poster reads “*Learn to Use Pesticides Safely.*” If you walk into the EPA headquarters building in Washington, DC, go through the security checks and are escorted into the elevator up to the third floor, the first thing you see coming off the elevator in front of the office of the Assistant Administrator for Prevention, Pesticides and Toxic Substances is a poster with these words: “*Learn to Use Pesticides Safely.*”

When I first saw that sign I was struck (again) by how EPA's pesticide program has misinterpreted its mission by not alerting the public to the real dangers of pesticides, and not providing the tools and guidance for alternatives. How can you use a pesticide safely (or as EPA says, in accordance with the label instructions), if the agency knows pesticides (i) have not been fully tested for health outcomes generally and for subpopulation groups specifically, (ii) could be synergistic with other chemicals, and (iii) are regulated by risk assessments that allow some rate of illness to occur, ignore exposure patterns outside an arbitrary norm, and have high uncertainty factors. That's just for starters.

## Pesticides are poisons

A little further down the EPA hallway is another poster: “*Pesticides Are Meant to Poison These (insects), Not These (baby children).*” It was good to see EPA acknowledge that pesticides are poisons, if only subtly. But the second part of the sign *should* read: and they poison babies every day too. The message is that pesticides only hit their target pest population, which EPA knows is untrue given pesticide drift and volatility. It also misleads the public into thinking that all insects are bad.

## Toxic green lawns

Then the EPA notice arrived. EPA was announcing a conference in March at which it is hearing from the public and industry on draft *Lawn and Environment Guidelines* that have been in the works for over a year “to help develop a strategy for educating consumers about the proper use of pesticides and fertilizers, and how to conserve water and protect wildlife while maintaining a healthy and attractive home landscape.”

EPA and the pesticide industry like to talk about the “proper use of pesticides.” It is misleading. Terribly misleading. It is code for “safe” use of pesticides. But, neither EPA, nor the pesticide industry can describe their pesticides as safe under the *Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act* (FIFRA) because that would be a fraudulent misrepresentation of the law's standard. The U.S. General Accounting Office has pointed this out and the Attorney General of New York and others have won cases on this. So, the implication of “proper use” is that if you follow the pesticide label, then you need not worry about adverse health or environmental effects. It means the consuming public and users of pesticides or services that use pesticides do not need to concern them-

selves with whether a pesticide is fully tested for impacts on their children, their pets, wildlife and the environment. It means that the public should not worry about whether there is a less toxic or better way to prevent, manage or live with the pest in question.

EPA's pesticide program views as one of its major responsibilities the quelling of public concern about pesticide hazards. Does the EPA say straightforwardly: Pesticides can kill you... cause cancer... damage your nervous system... destroy your immune system... harm your children's ability to concentrate and learn... cause respiratory illness... and toxic pesticides are unnecessary in managing pests in most situations and unwarranted, in light of their hazards, for cosmetic uses. No, EPA does not say this.

## Greenwashing chemical lawn care guidelines

EPA and the pesticide industry imply that pesticides are both safe if properly handled and central tools for pest management. The pesticide industry has historically advocated for a weak statutory standard with high degrees of allowable risks and uncertainties, and then wants the public to believe that the resulting regulations will protect people and the environment fully. Guidance of this sort undermines efforts sweeping Canada and beginning in the U.S. to stop the unnecessary use of lawn and landscape chemicals, pesticides on school grounds, etc. The same pesticide industry that seeks to bathe itself in greenwash, by trying to link with environmentalists, has launched a major public relations effort organized by the Evergreen Foundation to combat “coordinated activist efforts to curtail or even eliminate pesticides and fertilizers...” At least two of the industry group participants in the lawn and environment guidelines, the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA) and Scott's Company, are funding Evergreen.

While chemical industry groups lobby the outcome of legislation and regulations in an effort to protect their market share, they should not influence management guidelines such as these being developed, which should seek to eliminate use or dependency on toxic products.

Adding to the toolbox to phase out toxic and cosmetic pesticide use, this is an important issue of *Pesticides and You*, with articles by Sandra Steingraber and Warren Porter. These are extraordinary scientists doing work that should give anyone thinking of using lawn care chemicals the incentive to find another safer way, and soon.

And someday the EPA sign will read *Learn to stop using pesticides.*

—Jay Feldman is executive director of Beyond Pesticides.

