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Maine Voices: Portland's effort to reduce use of toxic pesticides is sorely needed

We don't need to use chemicals to nurture healthy public and private green space.

BY **JAY FELDMAN AND HEATHER SPALDING** SPECIAL TO THE PRESS HERALD

The city of Portland appears poised, after a long review, to adopt an ordinance to protect the community from the unnecessary use of toxic pesticides (herbicides, insecticides and fungicides) in the maintenance of park landscapes, playing fields and lawns. The ordinance, if passed, will stop the use of hazardous pesticides citywide.

The people of Portland have turned out in impressive numbers to testify in support of this ordinance before the City Council, a task force has considered the matter, and now a vote of the council – slated for Monday after having been rescheduled last month – is overdue.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Here's why the measure before the council is an urgent matter.

Toxic pesticides, which are of serious concern because of their adverse effects on people and the environment, are widely used in public parks and playing fields and on yards across the city. This shouldn't and doesn't need to be the case for two reasons: First, we can have beautiful parks, playing fields and lawns that meet community expectations without toxic pesticide use; and second, the scientific literature is filled with studies that link pesticide exposure to a range of serious health concerns – cancer, neurological and immune system damage, respiratory illness and asthma, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and diabetes.

Most troubling, since the vast majority of the areas treated with pesticides are used by children, is the link between pesticides and learning disabilities and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. Pets, too, are adversely affected.

And hazardous exposure isn't limited to contact with land: It occurs through air and water, too, as a pesticide application moves off the treated site and spreads in air currents and runoff into neighboring properties and waterways.

Perhaps the most widely used weedkiller, glyphosate (RoundUp), is associated with a wide range of illnesses, including non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, genetic damage, liver and kidney damage and endocrine disruption, as well as environmental damage, including water contamination and harm to amphibians.

Why is City Council action needed, especially now? Residents of Portland are not being protected by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which is charged with evaluating the adverse effects of pesticides and determining how they can be used without "unreasonable" risks. The head of the EPA, on record as wanting to dismantle the agency, has begun to roll back already-weak regulations that restrict pesticides and place former chemical industry employees or consultants in high-level regulatory positions. This has a direct

effect on Portland, the health of residents and the environment, including managed and native bees.

As the concerns about pesticide exposure escalate in the scientific and medical community, land managers in Maine and across the country are rethinking the management of turf on a range of sites, including parks, school grounds, playing fields, golf courses, public spaces and yards. The approach of putting down a bag of petroleum-based synthetic weed killers and fertilizers is increasingly understood to create a chemical dependency in lawn and garden management that is not only harmful, but costly and unnecessary to achieving desired results.

This important measure, then, is just as much about preventing hazards and filling an increasing gap in protection from regulators, as it is about recognizing the viability of sound land management practices that do not rely on toxic chemicals, and result in healthier turf that stands up to stress and is less reliant on water.

The outdated chemical-intensive practices are tied to the belief that parks, playing fields and home lawns require toxic chemicals and synthetic fertilizers to be managed to community expectations. So an approach that recognizes the importance of soil biology in cycling nutrients naturally by breaking down organic matter to feed plants is often new to many land managers who have not evaluated and nurtured the soil food web of microorganisms. This attention to the soil systems has been foundational to the success of the organic agriculture sector in Maine and nationwide.

If critics of this proposal tell the community that organic doesn’t work, they are, in effect, challenging the underlying principles of soil management that have enabled the exponential growth of the organic agricultural sector, now a $50 billion industry and the fastest-growing part of the agricultural economy.

The ordinance, with amendments that will be offered to ensure public oversight, transparency and an expedited effective date, should be adopted Monday so that the city can ensure public health and environmental protection from pesticides as soon as possible.