



## Interview With Lisa Arkin

**Bio:** Lisa Arkin, Executive Director of Beyond Toxics, has 13 years of experience in research and teaching in higher education and 12 years of non-profit management experience. Arkin initiated legislation for the Oregon State Senate that changed the statewide discussion around pesticides, drift and children's health and resulted in key legislation to reduce pesticides at all schools and state property in Oregon.

Her organization was also the first to research the relationship between field burning and underreported asthma in Oregon rural communities. This research helped make the case for the ban on field burning in the Willamette Valley.

Under Arkin's leadership, Beyond Toxics organized the model Environmental Justice project in the West Eugene Industrial Corridor.

This project revealed correlations between children's asthma and proximity to industrial sites emitting significant amounts of air toxics.

Arkin serves on a number of state workgroups on toxics, health, air quality and water quality.

**LandWatch:** *What motivated you to organize and work against the use and/or manufacture of toxic chemicals? Was there a defining moment?*

**Lisa Arkin:** I'm often asked how I went from being a university professor in the performing arts to becoming a fulltime environmental health advocate. There was a defining moment, indeed. It involved an egregious land use fiasco and two inspiring people, and suddenly I wanted to help stop the construction of the Hyundai chip plant in the West Eugene wetlands.

At that time I was a mother of two young boys, and I often took them to explore the wetlands. It was a wonderland of wildlife and plants, but after Hyundai was built, and spewed toxic chemicals such as hydrofluoric acid into the air, most of the critters died off or went away. I started thinking about how industrial chemicals wreak havoc on the environment and on all bio-systems. I was incensed that people who never gave their permission to be poisoned were exposed to noxious chemicals against their will.

At the same time I met Mary and Bob O'Brien, two motivating environmental leaders who were working to change the way lenient land use laws allow chemical trespass to occur. The first phase of the factory was already built, thanks to cronyism. But I joined the successful effort to stop Hyundai's plans for a second and third expansion of the plant; that was my first lesson in grassroots organizing.

The factory is now a mothballed wetlands eyesore, having ruined the landscape and siphoned off tax dollars that would have gone to school funding. But it would have been three times as devastating had we not taken action. I became a true believer in the effectiveness of citizen organizing to prevent harm to our community, both environmentally and economically.

**LW:** *Honey bees, elk, human autism and cancers. Toxic chemicals have been implicated in the declining health of potentially the entire biological spectrum. What will it take to meaningfully curb or stop their use? Do you think that's possible on a scale large enough to be effective?*

**LA:** I became familiar with how infinitesimal amounts of toxic chemicals are able to change biological systems when I was in graduate school. I participated in a study that administered a chemical to newly born rats, and tracked how exposure to that chemical could affect gender and reproduction. The expression of gender and behavior was determined by the injection of the chemical during vulnerable early development, not the gender the animal was born with. That experiment convinced me that the cumulative and synergistic chemical exposures we are receiving from our environment are primary contributors to disease and habitat pollution.

Toxics exposure is ubiquitous. The best way I know of to solve the problem is for our society to adhere to and invest in three key concepts: the Precautionary Principle, Nature's Legacy for Future Generations and the practice of Full Cost Accounting. Humankind must get off the treadmill of toxic chemicals and onto a path of preventing adverse environmental, social and economic harm. To do that I think will require disengaging from a culture of over-consumption, quick fix chemicals and corporate personhood. I believe it's possible, or I would not be doing the work of Beyond Toxics.

**LW:** *Tell us about your work. What strategy or strategies has/have proven most effective to stop toxics exposures and use?*

**LA:** Beyond Toxics' vision of social and environmental change integrates three strategies: 1) lifting community voices through grassroots organizing, 2) policy advocacy, and 3) citizen-based science. We work very closely within

communities, because we have a strong commitment to nurture authentic and respectful relationships with individuals and organizations. These values are necessary to truly empower communities to fight deeply embedded systems of discriminatory policies, corporate dominance, racism and exporting the burden of toxic pollution to the public.

When we work within community, that means we "show up" and spend time: we stay overnight, we visit people's homes and invite them to our homes, we bring doctors and help people get medical care, we have meals together, we get them face-to-face meetings with elected officials, and we send journalists to meet them so that media coverage is as accurate and authentic as possible.

We use a variety of strategies to accomplish our victories. I would characterize our work as being nimble and creative. A few examples of the scope of our strategies include:

**Environmental Justice:** In 2012, Beyond Toxics organized the first Oregon Environmental Justice Bus Tour, which revealed the disproportionate burden of air pollution in disenfranchised communities in the Industrial Corridor. Notably, a successful outcome is a new awareness and the adoption of environmental justice criteria in the City of Eugene planning policies.

**Old-Fashioned Protests and Rallies:** Also in 2012, we led the local protests against coal trains slated for the southern Oregon coast. We helped bust a secret cabal of energy export corporations when we filed a public records request to uncover a plan to resurrect a defunct and abandoned rail line that sliced through rare salmon habitat on its way to the coast. Beyond Toxics led rallies, wrote scathing editorials, constructed a dirty coal train for the Eugene Celebration parade, and introduced a local No Coal resolution. The No Coal resolution was passed by the Eugene City Council. All these tactics helped kill the project to build the coal export terminal.

**Citizen Science:** In December 2013, Beyond Toxics published the first-ever report on "Oregon's Industrial Forests and Herbicide Use: A Case Study of Risk to People, Drinking Water and Salmon." We used GIS mapping, water quality sampling and statistics to show why rural communities were complaining they were getting very sick from chemical exposure – because forestry corporations had increased herbicide use by 99% over the course of only three years. Our extensive report exposes the root causes of pesticide poisoning. It was published just before a criminal investigation into an aerial spray that poisoned over 40 people near Gold Beach.

**LW:** *Are you working on legislation? The Forest Practices Act is one of the most egregious enablers of pesticide application and trespass. What will it take to reform the act, and to severely restrict or stop the use of pesticides in forest practices?*

**LA:** We have a good track record. Beyond Toxics has successfully introduced and provided leadership for the passage of four significant laws: 1) Ban on Field Burning; 2) No topping off and vapor control at gas stations; 3) Oregon's School Pesticide Reduction law; 4) State Integrated Pest Management.

We have set our sights on bringing forward strong legislation to reform the Forest Practices Act in 2015. Oregon has allowed itself to fall behind regulations in other states by continuing to follow a set of outdated, egregious laws that allow herbicide aerial sprays over homes and tributaries to salmon streams and drinking water. We have publically laid out our policy recommendations (for example, see [http://www.beyondtoxics.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/PoisonedParadise-8pt5x11\\_PRINT-Ready.pdf](http://www.beyondtoxics.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/PoisonedParadise-8pt5x11_PRINT-Ready.pdf)).

We believe that an informed public who can be conversant with specific ways that Oregon laws must improve to protect people and drinking water will win the

day over corporate lobbyists. However, it will take a tremendous and unceasing push from Oregonians all over the state to force a reluctant Governor and legislature to tell the timber industry to quit poisoning our residents with aerial herbicide sprays, a practice reminiscent of the Vietnam War and Agent Orange.

**LW:** *Is the use of pesticides ever justified?*

I think that there are specific cases where a pesticide might be justified, if and only if it passes the triple test of the Precautionary Principle, Nature's Legacy for Future Generations and the practice of Full Cost Accounting. We must use precaution first and research alternatives. We must know that there is no violation of nature's legacy. We must fully understand and guarantee that the benefits far outweigh the societal/environmental costs. And let's get toxic products like 2,4-D and neonicotinoids off of store shelves so that unsuspecting homeowners are not applying bio-persistent pesticides in residential neighborhoods.

**LW:** *Must we go beyond toxics?*

**LA:** Increasingly, medical research confirms that disease and neurological deficits have a developmental origin; in other words, all of our functions, from reproductive to cognitive, are shaped or programmed during critical windows of vulnerability. These mostly occur when babies are developing in the womb or during the early years of life.

There needs to be a paradigm shift that acts decisively to ensure that what we breathe, drink, eat and absorb through our skin is safe, and does nothing to harm developmental processes. I believe that such a paradigm shift will involve inserting a human rights ethic into every aspect of regulation. Each of us has the right not be chemically trespassed upon.

We can go beyond toxics by supporting a system that stops using profit and efficiency as the excuse to poison the planet and all living systems.