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Opinion

Arkin: Sustainable farming can protect children

By Lisa Arkin

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Last week Clatsop County Commissioner Kathleen Sullivan delivered a message from her rural county to the Oregon Legislature during hearings on bills addressing a highly toxic pesticide.

“I remember when I was a kid in 7th grade being told the American Bald Eagle was on the brink of extinction,” Commissioner Sullivan said. “Today I can look up over the Columbia River and see the eagles flying. That is the result of policy makers banning DDT.”

In testifying in support of SB 853 and HB 3058, two bills that would ban the organophosphate insecticide, chlorpyrifos, Commissioner Sullivan said she had spoken to a number of Clatsop farmers who lost all their bees last year. Recounting the comeback of bald eagles helped support Sullivan’s message about bees. “I trust exhaustive worldwide research that says our pollinators are in trouble. And I understand how this puts our food system in danger,” she said.

A broad coalition of Oregon businesses and farmers support banning chlorpyrifos, including the Oregon Grange, biodynamic vineyards, vegetable farmers and beekeepers, as well as health professionals and labor representatives. Chlorpyrifos is a powerful neurotoxic pesticide used on common foods we feed our families, such as strawberries, apples, beans, oats and more.

There are decades of scientific study that have all come to one inescapable conclusion: Chlorpyrifos destroys populations of bees, fish and birds. Even more alarming, peer-reviewed research shows this neurotoxin damages the brains of young children. Scientists concur: There is no safe level of chlorpyrifos for children, nor for a fetus in the womb. Former EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt cancelled the agency’s plan to ban chlorpyrifos on food crops — even though the

EPA's own scientists determined there are no safe levels of chlorpyrifos on food. In 2018, Hawaii banned chlorpyrifos. A number of other states are also stepping up to protect children and the environment from the risks of using chlorpyrifos.

Many farmers defend their use of organophosphate pesticides as the only thing that will work on certain insects. They may not know the history of this pesticide, a chemical originally developed in WWII Nazi Germany as a nerve gas weapon. Something powerful enough to kill soldiers can also kill a lot of bugs! The problem is that chlorpyrifos also kills bees and butterflies — and can disrupt a child's brain for life.

Insects such as native bumblebees pollinate the plants that supply more than a third of the food we eat daily. Yet, more than one in four native bee species is in peril of becoming extinct, according to the Center for Biological Diversity. What will Oregon farmers do when pollinators stop showing up to pollinate their crops?

Oregon farmers testifying at the recent legislative hearings stated they just want to keep on doing what they love to do — growing radishes, wheat, hazelnuts and all manner of agricultural crops. We all share that goal. Yet, there were marked differences in farmer testimony.

Fear-based farmers spoke of losing their crops if they couldn't use this single outdated and extremely dangerous pesticide, chlorpyrifos.

In contrast, hope-based farmers talked about using innovation and safer chemistry to work with the land to harvest nutritious crops — without poisoning pollinators and children. Clay Wesson, a representative of Willamette Valley Vineyards, a biodynamic winemaker, was hopeful that Oregon can lead the agricultural industry away from devastatingly harmful pesticides. "I have confidence that the farmers in Oregon are brilliant and can find an option," he said. "And there are other options."

Wesson is part of a new generation of farmers making Oregon fourth in the nation for sustainable agriculture. With \$49.4 billion in national organic sales, sustainable farming represents the promise of the future.

As with their ban on DDT, policy makers must eliminate chlorpyrifos so that future generations will have the joy of watching a fluttering Monarch butterfly and seeing our kids reach their full creative potential. Votes are scheduled for April 9.

We are running out of time to solve our environmental crises. We must embrace solutions that create healthy soils and sustain beneficial insect populations. The time for innovative solutions that challenge outdated methodologies has arrived. Oregon can — and must — lead the way.

Lisa Arkin is the executive director of Beyond Toxics, Oregon's oldest environmental justice nonprofit.

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