

EDITORIAL

Get smart about pesticides

Bill would lead to more effective, less frequent use

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With the possible exception of the companies that sell the chemicals, everyone has an interest in ensuring that public agencies use pesticides only when necessary. A proposal before the Oregon Legislature, the Safe Public Places Act, would require state agencies to be deliberate in their use of pesticides. House Bill 3364 is not a ban, but agencies needing to control unwanted insects, plants, animals or molds would be expected to think twice before turning to chemicals.

The bill requires all state agencies to adopt integrated pest management, or IPM, policies. Only state lands and buildings, not private property, would be affected. Oregon State University's College of Agriculture, which has a well-regarded IPM research and education program, would lead an inter-agency committee to prepare and evaluate agencies' policies.

An agency guided by IPM principles would, in general, use chemical means of pest control only when no other effective option can be found. When pesticides are the best or only choice, an IPM policy would help ensure that the appropriate chemical is

chosen and that it is applied properly.

In Arizona, IPM policies have led to a 75 percent reduction in pesticide use. The Washington state Department of Transportation has an IPM policy governing its weed control program on all state highways and roadsides, along with 100,000 acres of public land, and saw its use of herbicides decline by 70 percent over a five-year period. Oregon could expect similar results.

Such reductions bring financial savings — pesticides are expensive. Limiting the use of pesticides to situations of true necessity, and then ensuring that the right chemical is used in the right amount and under the right conditions, would have a significant effect on some agencies' budgets.

More important, less use means less human exposure. While the effects of exposure to herbicides sprayed in parks or along roadways, or to insecticides applied in or around public buildings, are a subject of heated dispute, no one would argue that state workers and their clients would be better off with more chemicals in their bloodstreams. HB 3364 would also require that state agencies provide public notice before applying pesticides, allowing people to avoid exposure.

Some state agencies with high-profile pesticide programs — the departments of transportation and forestry come to mind — have wrestled with controversies over chemical pest control for decades, and have IPM policies or their rough equivalents in place already. Other agencies responsible for maintaining buildings or grounds haven't given much thought to the issue. HB 3364 would ensure that Oregon government as a whole does what it can to minimize the financial cost of pesticides and the health effects of exposure to them. The bill deserves approval.

Comments

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