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2013 legislative session wasn't a total loss for product safety advocates

By Lisa Arkin, Beyond Toxics

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Lisa Arkin is the executive director of Beyond Toxics.

The 2013 Oregon Legislature will not be noted in the history books for passing many laws to protect the environment. [Media outlets have bemoaned the Legislature's lackluster performance](#) to improve environment and public health.

But there is good news for environmental health, and it's well worth reporting. An important environmental measure, [House Bill 3364](#), did pass during this legislative session. The new law means the State of Oregon is taking a leading step to heed the science on the risks of pesticides.

Starting immediately, all state agencies will work to reduce pesticides that were routinely used on state roads, parks, and forests and in office buildings.

Protecting environmental health has always been a race between action and disaster. Consider the recent news about the decimation of over 50,000 honey and bumble bees from a pesticide spray at a Wilsonville Target store, or the pesticide poisoning of school children in India, or the lawsuit against the maker of the herbicide Atrazine for the contamination of domestic drinking water in a number of Midwest cities.

In light of these tragedies, HB 3364 is cause for optimism and celebration.

Statewide environmental advocates at Beyond Toxics led the effort to introduce and pass HB 3364, also known as the Safe Public Places Act. The bill was supported by the Oregon Conservation Network and over 35 environmental and social justice groups. Beyond Toxics is a statewide environmental health nonprofit working to guarantee environmental protections and health for all by exposing root causes of toxic pollution and helping find effective, lasting solutions.

We played the key role in the passage of Oregon's law to protect school children from pesticides in 2009 and Oregon's rules to eliminate the majority of benzene fumes at gas stations.

As our technologies race ahead of prudence, we've learned that local actions can have universal ramifications, for better or worse. The mostly untested tons of synthetic chemicals unleashed on the world affects every living creature. They're in our food, soil, oceans, and air. Toxic industrial chemicals lodge in our bodies without our knowledge or consent.

These chemicals are powerful agents that can change our body chemistry. Recent research shows that minuscule levels of pesticide exposure can affect children's developing brains and behavior. In the environment, pesticides decimate bees, disorient salmon, and turn male frogs into females.

On June 4, Gov. Kitzhaber signed the Safe Public Places bill into law. Also known as the “State Integrated Pest Management Bill,” it passed handily in both chambers of the Oregon legislature with solid bipartisan support.

Beyond Toxics led the advocacy effort that helped Oregon legislators look objectively at the science, often a rare practice in a partisan environment. Oregonians can rest assured that the underpinnings of HB 3364 are scientifically unassailable.

The law requires that all pest management — from controlling weeds to eliminating rodents — be done in a manner that “minimizes risks to human health, non-target organisms, native fish and wildlife habitat, watersheds and the environment.”

HB 3364 champions integrated pest management (IPM) solutions that use the checks and balances of natural systems and mitigate the need for pesticides. Under the law, state policies will be guided by the State IPM Coordinator at Oregon State University’s Integrated Plant Protection Center. OSU ranks at the top of U.S. universities in advancing a rigorous scientific program to help agriculture and forest operations reduce the need for pesticides. Since testing is the essence of the scientific method, the bill specifically requires measurable performance results toward the goal of “protecting the health and welfare of children, the elderly and other members of the public.”

Integrated pest management policies are just beginning to be implemented across the country in response to our expanding understanding of pesticide’s disastrous impacts to people and ecosystems. Oregonians can be justifiably proud that we are in the forefront of so many environmental and public health issues, and that Oregon’s law is a particularly comprehensive and laudable model.

Change is a collaborative process. Addressing the dangers of toxic chemicals requires the commitment of educators, scientists, advocates, legislators, and an aware public. We’re profoundly grateful for the collaborative efforts of the governor’s staff, law makers, non-profits, educational institutions, and agencies.

Beyond Toxics gives special thanks to Rep. Alissa Keny-Guyer, a Portland Democrat who was the legislative powerhouse who steered the bill’s successful passage. Other legislators, including Senators Chris Edwards, Elizabeth Steiner Hayward, Ginnie Burdick and Laurie Monnes Anderson were the bill’s chief co-sponsor. Thank you to the twenty-four senators who voted “yes” to make Oregon a safer and healthier place.

In the constant battle between precaution and disaster, this law is a significant victory in our effort to blend precaution with scientific principles to prevent problems that threaten public health.

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