

Beyond Pesticides at 30 years: Successes and Challenges

At our 30th anniversary celebration in Washington, D.C. in October, we screened the movie *Vanishing of the Bees* and were joined by many of the featured beekeepers, including Dave Hackenberg who first identified colony collapse disorder (CCD). We point to the CCD phenomenon, in which bees disappear from their hives, as the tragedy that befalls us when our pesticide regulatory system does not fully address the complexity of hazards and fails to ask whether we really need to allow the widespread use of a toxic chemical. With bees, it has become obvious even to the casual observer that the regulatory system fails to evaluate the impact of systemic pesticides —these are chemicals that are incorporated into the plant tissue and express themselves through the pollen. The regulatory system fails to consider chronic low-dose exposure effects and the effect of a weakened immune system in creating vulnerability to all kinds of diseases, viruses, and bacteria in all organisms, from insects to humans.

Strategic Lessons of 30 years

With a history of 30 years, the phenomenon of a failed regulatory system is not new to Beyond Pesticides. Certainly, the failures that have been captured in volumes of scientific studies and policy critiques are important to our strategic thinking on solutions. In Beyond Pesticides' relatively short history, our societal dependence on insecticides has moved through numerous chemical families whose effects have become unacceptable over time —from the arsenic-based chemicals, DDT family or organochlorines, to the organophosphates like Dursban (or chlorpyrifos). As the chemical industry continues to promote its new pesticide products as the solution to pest problems, attempts to restrict toxic chemical uses have through the decades repeatedly failed to adequately protect people and the environment.

What is the strategic lesson? Tinkering with a broken chemical-intensive approach fails to acknowledge the seriousness of the chemical-induced problems and the viability of alternative approaches.

Adverse effects of pesticides are not theoretical or an abstraction. Beyond Pesticides' online *Pesticide-Induced Disease Database* (PIDD) is showing in real time that chemical-induced public health diseases are linked to pesticide exposure —from asthma, cancers, learning disabilities, reproductive problems, Parkinson's, to Alzheimer's, and more.

Organic is the solution to pesticide pollution

Much of this was predictable 30 years ago when we launched Beyond Pesticides, then the National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides. We knew that all those at greatest risk to pesticides, such as farmworkers and those showing poisoning symptoms from typical legal pesticide use, needed to join with large numbers of people, scientists, policy makers, pest management practitioners, farmers, and food manufacturers. We set out to do this, calling for an end to pesticide dependency, and the widespread adoption of organic

practices.

Today, our vision is becoming a mainstream reality. The burgeoning organic movement has found its way into mainstream culture, in grocery stores, schools, hospitals, and in the homes of millions of people across the country and worldwide. However, in order for organic to become truly mainstream, I believe that Beyond Pesticides' ongoing and consistent vigilance is critical. We face the attack on organic integrity on a daily basis.

Successes nationwide

Still, we are seeing our movement to take pesticides out of our communities, schools, hospitals, parks, and homes grow daily. A Thomson Reuters-NPR Health Poll released in July finds that 58% of Americans say they choose organic food when they have the opportunity, with the highest percentage (63%) in the under 35 age group. People and families increasingly understand that their support of organic practices is an investment in their long-term health by taking toxic chemical residues out of their food, air, water, and soil, while protecting farmworkers and fighting global climate change. And, Beyond Pesticides is fighting to ensure accessibility to organic food through federal and state food and school lunch programs, while encouraging lower cost food distribution systems, such as farmers markets and buying clubs.

Challenges continue

As our success grows, so do the challenges. In the food arena, we see critics challenging organic systems with misinformed attacks and efforts to embrace weaker standards that are out of sync with the organic law and public expectations. Just last month the town of Highland Park, IL was being encouraged by a University of Illinois Extension staff member to reintroduce pesticides into its program for the management of its park system. Two of Beyond Pesticides' board members (a scientist and a practitioner) and I brought the facts to the Park Board and the organic program is moving forward. There is a similar challenge in Connecticut, where the CT Pesticide Applicators Association, which now calls itself the CT Environmental Council, is fighting to reverse a state law that requires organic turf management on school grounds.

Consider support in our 30th year

This issue of *Pesticides and You* shows us both the problems and the promise —real choices that we make in the marketplace and in the policy arena. We have laid the foundation for alternatives to toxic pesticides and with your help we can build on that foundation.



Thanks for your support and best wishes for the holiday season and new year.

Jay Feldman is executive director of Beyond Pesticides.