

Leading with a Caring Vision and Foresight

Concern about the environment has “exploded as a political and moral issue all over the world.” That, according to the director of the Norwegian Nobel Institute, Geir Lundestad, in reference to the level of interest in Al Gore’s Nobel Prize for his work on global warming.

On morality, we have a responsibility to define what is right and protective of health and the environment, future generations and the earth –to have a vision. Clearly, what is right may not always be easy. It may challenge our conventional wisdom, cultural practices and status quo. But, the challenge of doing right can be exhilarating and it will certainly be rewarding. Maybe a sense of morality will help us to ask and do what is necessary, and not be constrained by what we believe is acceptable.

I recently asked an integrated pest management (IPM) professional why we should allow certain exceptions to restrictions on chemical use we know to be hazardous or untested, chemicals for which we have alternative approaches and less toxic products. The answer: the pest control industry is not ready to give up these chemicals.

The foresight principle

“I believe that IPM offers a solution, but it’s not necessarily a vision,” says Debbie Raphael, toxics reduction and green building manager for the City of San Francisco, whose talk is featured in this issue of PAY from the Beyond Pesticides 25th National Pesticides, *Changing Course in a Changing Climate: Solutions for health and the environment*, June 2007, Chicago. Ms. Raphael says that IPM was born of a fight between industry, pesticide users and the public and it offered a solution, but not a vision. The vision, says Ms. Raphael, is embraced in the notion of foresight and caring (from the German phrase *Vorsorgeprinzip*, *vorsorge*) and then translated in the U.S. as the precautionary principle.

I am constantly reminded by how little foresight we actually bring to environmental protection in the U.S., despite, as Ms. Raphael points out, our 1969 *National Environmental Policy Act*, which states:

“The nation, recognizing the profound impact of man’s activity on the interrelations of all components of the natural environment, particularly the profound influence of population growth, high density urbanization, industrial expansion, resource exploitation and new and expanding technological advances, and recognizing further the critical importance of restoring and maintaining environmental quality to the overall welfare and development of humankind, declares that it is the continuing policy of this nation to use all practical means and measures to create and maintain conditions under which people and nature can exist in productive harmony for present and future generations. In order to carry out this policy, it is the continuing responsibility of this nation to use all practical means to the end that the nation may fulfill the responsibilities of each generation as trustee of the environment for succeeding generations.”

A reporter called me recently and recited the complex pesticide issues that EPA says it is facing in the coming year. Two are not new to the agency’s pesticide program. Endocrine disruptors and endangered species. More than 10 years after being mandated by Congress, the EPA announced in 2007 that it will test 73 pesticides for their potential to damage the endocrine system and disrupt the normal functioning of hormones in the body. “This initial list of 73 chemicals is only a small fraction of the universe of 1,700 chemicals that the agency has identified for screening under the FQPA [*Food Quality Protection Act*] mandate. . .EPA apparently has no internal deadline for identifying subsequent sets of chemicals for testing, and no plan whatsoever for ensuring that all chemicals of potential concern will be tested,” according to a letter from members of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. EPA told the reporter it has a hard job with endocrine disruptors and that it faces serious hurdles in complying with a court decision requiring EPA to consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service on its pesticide registration decision impacts on endangered species. . .not a new issue.

Any student of pesticides and pesticide policy does not take long to come to the conclusion that the system of regulatory review and public disclosure is broken. Yes, endocrine disruption and endangered species are complex issues, but not half as complicated as some other issues that EPA does not even have on the table, such as synergistic effects of pesticide mixtures and pesticide, pharmaceutical and other toxic mixtures. And yet, EPA’s mantra to the public is “read the pesticide product label first,” as if to suggest that strict compliance with the label would be protective of health and the environment. Instead, if EPA had foresight and a sense of caring, it would WARN and ALERT people to the fact that it has never been able to grapple with the difficult issues that could begin to define pesticide safety. With that information, people could be informed to act to stay away from pesticides to the extent possible. And, when the City of San Francisco and other communities were faced with the political will of its elected officials, they chose foresight (precaution) and found that with some few exceptions toxic pesticides were not necessary.

Compost

One of the alternatives that brings focus to these issues is compost, featured in this issue of PAY. It embodies for lawn and landscape management an appreciation for biological systems that eliminates the need for pesticides by ensuring the proper mixture of decayed organic matter and microbial colonies, in a well-balanced ratio of

carbon and nitrogen. Healthy soil results in healthy plants, thus avoiding the need for pesticides. It’s simple.

Best wishes for a healthy and happy holiday season and new year!

- Jay Feldman is executive director of *Beyond Pesticides*

