

Letter from Washington

35 Years of Progress and the Tipping Point Within Our Sight

Beyond Pesticides in 2016 celebrates a rich 35-year history of accomplishments in organic policy and land management. We are honored to be part of an extensive network of communities, people, organizations, scientists, and practitioners that educates on the hazards of pesticides, while moving decision and policy makers to adopt sustainable organic practices. With its proven viability, we see within our sights the opportunity for a societal transformation to organic practices that protect the environment on which life depends.

Meeting the urgent challenges

We use this occasion only to reenergize ourselves to meet the urgent challenges ahead. We are at the center of the organic transformation that crosses issues of clean air and water, healthy food, and soil practices that build organic matter, sequesters carbon, and slows climate change. In fighting pesticides, we protect pollinators and the ecosystem, advance systems that eliminate toxic pesticides, ensure workplaces safe for workers, and create communities protective of vulnerable population groups like children and those with pre-existing health conditions. Organic management systems are required—whether in agriculture, parks, playing fields, or rangeland, from backyards to vineyards, from playing fields to cornfields. We can no longer afford toxic-intensive approaches that are not necessary.

Talking a holistic organic approach

Since our founding in 1981, Beyond Pesticides has taken a holistic approach to advancing sustainable practices and policies and solving the pesticide poisoning and contamination problem through the adoption of organic policies and practices. We understood from our inception that the dependency on toxic pesticides is unnecessary since productivity, profitability, and quality of life can be achieved with organic systems. In this context, although our founders recognized the importance of measures to restrict pesticide use through improved chemical regulation and effective toxic pesticide use reduction strategies, we believed a crosscutting grassroots organization was needed to help reframe the public debate that had emerged since the publication of *Silent Spring*, less than 20 years earlier.

Breaking down institutional barriers

Despite laws governing clean air, water, food safety, and pesticides of the 1970's, the chemicalization of society advanced at tremendous speed with full support of the chemical industry, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and state and local governments nationwide. In fact, the pesticide law, which remains to this day under the jurisdiction of the Agriculture Committees of Congress, incorporated an institutional bias that highly toxic pesticides are essential to food productivity and quality of life. Our work to advance organic agricultural systems created a new policy framework and helped to launch a precautionary approach, starting with the premise that we do not need toxic chemicals to achieve food productivity goals. Rather, we recognized that the law must require restoration and regeneration of the soil. Since the early years of the organization, numerous studies and experience show that organic

agricultural systems can feed the world better than chemical-intensive approaches. While we tinkered with integrated pest management (IPM) as an agricultural tool to reduce pesticide dependency, the lack of a holistic approach to soil health, protection of biodiversity, and the identification of least-toxic inputs diminished its effectiveness as a long-term sustainability approach in land management.

I served on the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) for a 5-year term (2010-2015). Having spearheaded the 1982 *Organic Farming Act*, which became the 1983 *Agricultural Productivity Act* and USDA's Low-Input Sustainable Agriculture (LISA) program, and then the 1990 *Organic Foods Production Act* (OFPA), we knew we had tremendous institutional barriers within USDA to implement policies that defied the chemical-intensive norms.

We understood that change starts in the community. Communities are increasingly seeking to prevent and eliminate, rather than simply reduce, toxic chemical use. They recognize the importance of healthy ecological systems at a time when increasingly smaller doses of systemic chemicals wreak havoc with life and the natural balance.

Local power

The recent passage in October, 2015 of legislation banning toxic lawn pesticides on *both public and private land* in Montgomery County, Maryland, with one million people the largest such jurisdiction in the U.S., is an achievement that we seek to replicate in increasing numbers across the country. This victory, in addition to ones in Ogunquit, Maine (2014) and in Takoma Park, Maryland (2013), brought national attention to possibility of community-wide transition to organic land management. Industry is now pushing legislation in Maine and Maryland to overturn local law restricting pesticides and prevent future local action, as is the case in 43 states that preempt local municipalities. Our community-based work recognizes that pesticides move off the target site and onto neighboring land and into waterways through drift in the air and runoff, causing "secondhand" poisoning and contamination.

Providing the tools for change

Our continued documentation of the science on adverse health and environmental effects of pesticides and weaknesses in the regulation of these toxic chemicals informs local action and is helping to drive the market toward organic. At the same time, it is critical that we defend the foundational federal organic law that establishes the

standards governing sustainable practices against an attack by some food and chemical companies, and the right of local governments to stop hazardous pesticide use throughout their jurisdictions. It's an honor to work with you! Thank you!



Jay Feldman is executive director of Beyond Pesticides.