

Letter from Washington

Bed Bug Frenzy

As humans, we are always fighting the next pest. Whether it is around our home or community, in the garden, or on the farm, we move from one pest crisis to the next. Then a chemical-intensive response often leads to the next pesticide crisis—poisoning and contamination follows. Sometimes the identified problem is managed with low level chemical use that doesn't attract much public attention. But other times, the problem escalates and headlines follow.

Bed bugs need a strategic response. No question.

But the toxic chemical response, which is too often the response, is not the answer. In October, it was reported by a news outlet that a New York City pest control company hired by the City's Department of Education for almost \$100,000 applied pesticides that, according to teachers, left the classrooms "soaked with a liquid bed bug killing chemical." At the time of this writing the chemical had not been identified.



A Teachable Moment

So, we have a teachable moment: a pest that most experts believe is not effectively controlled by chemicals; and, a recognition that the insect is resistant to the widely available chemicals allowed for use. Does this mean we should bring out a stronger and otherwise banned chemical, one that in 2007 was cancelled for all indoor uses that may result in exposure for children? The chemical in question, propoxur, is neurotoxic and carcinogenic. According to EPA, "The Agency's health review for its use on bed bugs suggests that children entering and using rooms that have been treated may be at risk of experiencing nervous system effects. The specific exposure scenarios that are of most concern involved inhalation risk and also hand-to-mouth behaviors on the part of children." In EPA-speak, that's a very strong statement.

For the moment, EPA has dismissed the idea of bringing back propoxur. A coalition of environmental groups, led by Beyond Pesticides, wrote EPA at the end of 2009, urging the agency to reject a request from the Ohio Department of Agriculture to allow the unregistered use of propoxur under an emergency provision in the nation's pesticide law, the *Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act* (Section 18). The agency then in June of this year told Ohio's Governor, in response to his April letter, "Although EPA recognizes the severe and urgent challenges that Ohio is facing from bed bugs, the results of the risk assessment do not support the necessary safety findings as required. . ." In the letter, EPA says it "is supportive of stakeholders involved in bed bug issues who are studying non-chemical practices to control bed bugs." The letter continues, "Some of these practices appear to have utility in homes and commercial settings (e.g. hotels and apartments), including the use of heat or cold to kill all life-stages of bed bugs and physical exclusion techniques to prevent bed bugs from entering areas where people reside and sleep (e.g. mattress encasements)." However, at the same time, EPA tells the Governor,

"We are collaborating with experts and stakeholders nationwide to determine what other pesticides may be effective for bed bug control."

Toxic Chemicals Are Not the Answer

At Beyond Pesticides, we saw the crisis coming and urged non-chemical preventive measures, an approach that always works best in pest management. In 2007, we published a factsheet on bed bugs, entitled *Bed Bugs - Back with a Vengeance: Detection, prevention and least-toxic control of bed bugs*. An updated version can be found on our website at www.beyondpesticides.org/bedbugs. Our approach involves a combination of methods that will (i) prevent most unwanted structural insects looking to get inside structures, and (ii) manage existing bed bug problems. We suggest the following: caulk and seal crevices, eliminate clutter, vacuum, launder fabrics and clothing, encase mattresses and box springs, steam treatment, and heat treatment. (See factsheet for more details.)

We can use the bed bug challenge and opportunity to reorient our nation's approach to pest management with questions and practices that prevent unwanted insects and rodents with techniques that eliminate points of entry, habitat, and sources of food and water that are attractive. If we embrace these non-chemical approaches, recognizing the failure and hazards of the chemical-intensive approach, we will not only improve the efficacy of our practices, but will better protect people from the public health diseases that are increasingly linked to pesticide exposure. Please feel free to contact Beyond Pesticides for non-toxic pest management strategies.

Please Consider a Donation to Beyond Pesticides

We ask you again this year to consider an end-of-year contribution to Beyond Pesticides to enable us to continue our important work. I believe that we are making headway in our program to hold back toxic pesticide use in our homes and communities. We play a critical role in keeping the pressure on decision makers and providing the support to local people and organizations at the same time that we work on policy to advance alternative strategies, like organic practices, that eliminate the use of toxic chemicals. We are honored to work with amazing scientists, policy makers, practitioners, and activists who share our vision for a toxic-free future that is healthy for people and the environment. And, we are grateful to have the support of Beyond Pesticides' members and supporters like you. We deeply appreciate your support in 2010. Please look for our appeal letter in the mail or donate on our website site at www.beyondpesticides.org/donate2010. Thank you for your support in 2010!



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