

GETTING THE MESSAGE ACROSS

How to talk to your family, friends, neighbors and lawmakers about pesticides- and get them to act!

There is an increasing awareness about health and environmental issues. From concerns about global climate change to pre-natal exposures to chemicals, many individuals are taking stock and becoming proactive about protecting their health and that of their families.

While this new awareness has had some impact on local, state and federal policies, the adoption of new protective and precautionary pesticide laws by municipalities and state governments has been slow. More than that, however, we must find a way to activate people who have been lulled into complacency and focused on these important issues. We must find ways to persuade them to move beyond concern to action; ways to transform the “silent majority” of Americans who say they want stronger health and environmental protections into a vocal army demanding change.

Below, Beyond Pesticides offers a brief primer on ways you can effectively talk to others about reducing unnecessary pesticide use.



Denial and other obstacles

Many Americans will simply retreat from disturbing news that the unnecessary use of pesticides is threatening their health. Even when confronted with their beliefs that existing protections may not be adequate, they will often take a step back and assert that the government is protecting them from harm. They simply do not want to believe that they and their families may be eating fruits and vegetables contaminated by dangerous pesticides, putting harmful chemicals on their lawns, or sending their children to poisoned schools.

Overcoming the obstacles

Overcoming these obstacles is not a simple task. However, it can be done. The secret is to understand how the person you are talking to thinks, and deliver a message that they will respond to. In the pesticide arena, we suggest a few key guidelines for talking about pesticides.

Emphasize human health - First, most Americans are concerned about the human health implications of pesticide use - not the threat that pesticides pose to wildlife or

the environment in general. So, while poisoned songbirds are a powerful symbol of the dangers of pesticides, they may not move everyone to action. What does move many people is the idea that dangerous pesticides-especially on food and in areas where they work and play - can cause cancer and other health problems, especially in children.

Stress saving money - Second, using fewer pesticides can save money spent on expensive chemicals typically used on lawns and in schools and parks. These can be replaced with less expensive pest prevention techniques, such as integrated pest management.

Use reasonable rhetoric - Third, the public does not trust advocates who use heated rhetoric. Your rhetoric must be balanced, logical, and unemotional. That does not mean you cannot speak with conviction about personal experience; but it does mean you have to consider the words, body language, and tone of voice you use to tell your story. A sense of humor, for example, can be an asset; there is no quicker way to turn off a listener, than by being overly serious and self-important.

Keep it simple - Fourth, technical and scientific ar-

guments do not sell well in the public marketplace of ideas. They too often confuse people rather than convince them. Moreover, technical arguments are too easily rebutted by opponents who have their own scientists. So you must ground your arguments in common sense - use relatively simple ideas that don't require technical expertise to understand or agree with.

Below, we suggest a few conversation themes that follow these four guidelines. They emphasize human health, can be discussed in a trusted, balanced manner, and are not bogged down in scientific detail. Most importantly, when linked to specific actions that are needed in your community or in national policies, they have the potential to move people beyond silence to active support of reform.

THEME 1: We Need To Protect Our Kids

Most Americans agree that kids are more vulnerable than adults to all kinds of threats. Many people already believe that pesticides pose a greater risk to children than to adults. You can use two common sense arguments to transform this belief into action:

"We shouldn't use dangerous pesticides in places where our children study and play."

- Talking points:** Currently many schools, day care centers, libraries, parks, backyards and other areas commonly used by children, regularly use dangerous pesticides. Alternatives are available.

- Action needed:** We should ask our schools, day care centers, neighbors, etc. about the pesticides they are using. We should ask them to use alternatives to dangerous pesticides. Other communities around the nation have been able to make the switch.

"We should make sure that pesticides on food don't hurt our children."

- Talking points:** Currently, federal standards for pesticide residues on food do not go far enough to protect children. These standards do not take into account cumulative exposures despite the fact that children eat relatively large quantities and varieties of food groups.

- Action needed:** Buy organic food whenever possible, es-

pecially milk, fruits and other foods that children eat most. Advocate for organic school lunches.

THEME 2: We Should Know What Is In Our Products

American consumers believe they have a right to know what is in the products and food they buy and have come to expect informative labels. You can use this common sense argument to transform this belief into action:

"Products should disclose all ingredients."

- Talking points:** We should have the opportunity to choose products that do not contain ingredients that can be hazardous to our health, and buy food that is grown without pesticides. The only way we will know, however, is if we have access to all the information.

- Action needed:** We should demand that companies fully disclose secret "inert" ingredients used in products. Buy organic food, especially the foods eaten most by your family, and encourage others to do the same.



THEME 3: We Can Do Better

Americans do care about the effects of harmful pesticides. They believe we can do better than the current situation. You can use these common sense arguments to transform this belief into action:

"Alternatives have already been shown to work and they should be more widely used."

- Talking points:** We don't spend enough time or energy developing alternatives. We don't reward farmers and food processors for using alternatives. However, every time we ban a dangerous pesticide, industry is able to find an alternative without disrupting our food supply. Why can't we do more?

- Action needed:** Ask your local representative to support pesticide, food safety, and agricultural policy laws that create more incentives for developing and using alternatives. Encourage and support those that do use or produce alternative products.

"Why allow the continued use of pesticides shown to be dangerous and unnecessary to control pests?"

- Talking points:** Current law allows the use of dangerous pesticides, whose risk assessments ignore actual eating

patterns and multiple exposures, despite the availability of safer, least-toxic alternatives.

•**Action needed:** Get involved and advocate for changes to current policy so that dangerous pesticides are taken off the market. Use alternative methods and products whenever possible.

THEME 4: We Can Save Money

Eliminating or using less pesticides can actually save money.

•**Talking points:** Instituting IPM programs in schools, or low-input farm practices can produce results with greater net savings or profit, depending whether we are talking about schools or farms.

In terms of affordability of food produced without pesticides, we must begin to calculate so-called external costs of pesticide pollution - polluted land, water, and air. Taxpayers pay a high price for cleaning up pollution, and high medical costs associated with the treatment of environmentally-induced diseases, such as cancer.

GETTING A CONVERSATION STARTED

Now that you have some ideas on how to talk effectively about pesticide issues by emphasizing public health, using balanced rhetoric, and staying away from technical issues, where do you start?

Pesticides, after all, are not a usual topic of everyday conversation. Sometimes, a question is a good place to

start. Ask a member of your family, a friend, or a neighbor what they think about the use of pesticides. Then, listen carefully. Are they concerned? Need more information? Reject the idea that pesticides pose a threat? What they say will lead you to your next step.

It could be useful to ask another question:

“Do you believe we could do a better job of protecting our children from pesticides?”

It could be sharing your experiences and concerns:

“The reason I asked was that I found out the school is using some pretty dangerous stuff and I was wondering about alternatives.”

Or, it could be promising to provide the person with more information and a few ideas for action:

“I know an organization that is trying to bring about change to pesticide laws right now. I can give you more information on that,” or *“You should call your representative and tell him/her what you just told me. I don’t think he/she knows how many people are concerned about this issue.”*

While they may seem insignificant, these kinds of conversations can be essential to turning the tide for strengthening our health and environmental protections. Industry is betting that the silent majority will remain mute and inactive. It will be up to us to make sure that, in the end, our health and safety is protected.

BEYOND PESTICIDES