

by [Elizabeth Daigneau](#) | March 2014



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In 1962, Rachel Carson published her controversial environmental classic, *Silent Spring*. In it, Carson, a marine biologist and conservationist, imagined a world compromised by synthetic pesticides, where nature was irreparably harmed and children sickened. The book inspired a grassroots environmental movement that continues today—a movement that’s seen the passing of the Clean Air and Water acts, the establishment of Earth Day and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency. Now, in many ways, that movement has come full circle.

This past July, a progressive suburb of 17,000 just outside of Washington, D.C., became the first city of its size to restrict pesticide use on private lawns and landscapes. More than 50 years after Carson warned of the dangers of pesticides, Takoma Park, Md., has banned 23 cosmetic lawn pesticides known to pose health risks.

“We want yellow in our lawns, with dandelions,” Julie Taddeo testified before the Takoma Park City Council last July, which unanimously passed the new law. She and fellow resident Catherine Cummings collected more than 450 signatures to get it before the city council. The motivating factor: They want to reduce pesticide use for the long-term health and safety of their children.

The National Institutes of Health links pesticide use to myriad health risks, especially in children. Of the 30 most commonly used lawn pesticides, for example, 17 are possible or known carcinogens, 18 have the potential to disrupt the endocrine system and 24 can cause kidney or liver damage, according to the advocacy group Beyond Pesticides. What’s more, pesticides can become pollutants when they’re washed by stormwater into local waterways.

But all pesticides aren’t bad, and the Takoma Park ordinance makes a number of exceptions to the ban, including pesticides used for public health or safety; control of noxious weeds; and protection of natural resources from invasive species.

Similar restrictions have been in place in most Canadian provinces for years, and several U.S. cities restrict pesticide use on public lands. Late last year, the Kauai and Hawaii County councils in Hawaii passed laws restricting the use of pesticides and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Hawaii County's rules ban biotech giants from the island and prohibit the new planting of GMO crops. Kauai's rules require disclosures from anyone growing GMOs or spraying agricultural pesticides, and create pesticide-free buffer zones near schools, parks, hospitals and homes.

The Takoma Park law, as well as Kauai and Hawaii County's laws, are possible because Maryland and Hawaii are two of just nine states that do not prohibit the adoption of local pesticide legislation. But that could change: In January, a bill was introduced in the Hawaii State House of Representatives that would preempt local governments from restricting the use of hazardous pesticides and GMO crops.

Similar bills have been introduced in Maryland in the past as well. Takoma Park Councilman Timothy Male says he has reached out to state representatives to stress the importance of local control. "What was appealing about [our law] was that community members were asking how much risk they were willing to take," says Male. "The community came together and said they didn't want pesticides. I like the idea that a community gets to weigh in on what they will tolerate."



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