

Irvine opts for organic pest, weed management

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By Sarah de Crescenzo

IRVINE – Organic pesticides will be the first line of defense for Irvine in fighting bugs and weeds, members of the City Council decided Tuesday.

Officials voted unanimously to stop using synthetic pesticides in response to a group of residents, who in 2015 formed the advocacy group Non Toxic Irvine to lobby governmental agencies and homeowners associations to manage plants and pests using organic methods and substances.

“In all cases, if pesticides are required organic pesticides would be used first,” said Dennis Chiotti, Irvine’s landscape maintenance superintendent. “Synthetic pesticides would be used only if other treatment options failed.”

Irvine has been experimenting with organic alternatives since November, when members of Non Toxic Irvine first reached out.

The city manages more than 570 acres of parks, more than 800 acres of right-of-way, 70,000 trees and nearly 1.5 million square feet of facilities.

Dozens turned out Tuesday to urge the council to issue official guidelines as to the use of pesticides and herbicides on city property and ban synthetic versions.

The California Environmental Protection Agency last year announced it planned to label glyphosate, a widely used herbicide, as probably carcinogenic to humans. More than 30 people requested to speak on the topic, including many parents who said they suspect that pesticides played a role in their children’s illnesses.

Dr. Dean Baker, a UC Irvine professor who directs the school’s Center for Occupational and Environmental Health and is an adviser with Non Toxic Irvine, said via video that children are the most susceptible to be harmed from pesticides because of their increased exposure from playing outdoors.

Bruce Blumberg, also a UCI professor and adviser to the group, said he and other researchers believe that endocrine-disrupting chemicals – including weedkiller ingredients such as 2,4-D and glyphosate – play a role in the rise of noncommunicable diseases.

“The data supporting adverse health effects of pesticides are very strong,” Blumberg said. “I personally think we have enough evidence to act.”

Bob Johnson, a former Community Development Director with Irvine, urged the city to be a leader in safe pest management.

The city's new policy emphasizes the use of organic pesticides and herbicides "whenever practical," limiting exposure where people gather and using products with active ingredients that are regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency only if needed to protect "public health and economic impact."

Other methods used for pest and weed control by the city and set out in the guidelines include the release of beneficial insects, use of organic fertilizer, mowing and daily custodial service.

Non Toxic Irvine has also found success petitioning the Irvine Unified School District, which recently formed a pest management team and has pinpointed an elementary school as a test site for an organic pesticide program.