



Friend's stallion in Houston TX

ZERO WASTE NEWSLETTER

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by Paul Palmer PhD

Ban it, Kill it, Chew it up, Destroy it

Those loyal readers who sometimes read this sometimes monthly newsletter know that I often take off on some article that appeared on the web. This month's inspiration comes from an article about a fight in central California against methyl iodide fumigants used to kill soil nematodes in the strawberry fields.

As you may have learned by now, this will not be one of those boringly conventional diatribes against the evils of chemicals. You can read about that everywhere. What interests me is the folly of man. Specifically how he works against his own longterm, more fundamental interests while convincing himself that he is fighting the good fight.

The article (see link at end) is about two bans. First, there was the ban against methyl bromide. For those of you who have not followed the story, this gas was used a decade or two ago in California to totally sterilize soil. A large polyethylene sheet was rolled out over the field to be fumigated and methyl bromide gas was injected into the soil. During the few days before it dissipated into the atmosphere or reacted with minerals, it killed essentially everything, leaving the soil ready for planting a variety of crops.

There was a vigorous campaign against the use of methyl bromide poison throughout California but it was its effect on the ozone layer that caused it to be banned in 1990. So what was going to be the fate of the strawberry munching nematodes? They didn't conveniently change their diet.

The major point here, is that there was a BAN! There wasn't a full scale program to find a way to grow strawberries. There was a BAN! This should sound familiar because those same activists are now wham bang in the middle of a BAN against plastic bags. They are rubbing their hands and slapping their backs over their success in BANNING the bags.

As I have pointed out before, a ban is a successful attempt to seize control of the coercive power of the state away from THEIR control and into YOUR control. In other words you are dictating to citizens that from now on they must OBEY YOU! But strangely, before your success in a ban, the other side was demanding that citizens had to OBEY THEM! Just the politics of power! Very little science and very little environmental analysis. You think your arguments are controlling and the opposition thinks their arguments are even better.

Where is the science and the environment in the middle of all this power struggle? Weakly calling out "Hey guys, remember me!" "Nobody's talking to you. Shut up and wait!".

My point about bans is always this: a ban is cheap and easy. The valuable and difficult part is designing the system that should replace the one being denigrated. If there is no replacement put forward, then anyone is free to come up with a new design that can be even worse than the one it is replacing.

Instead of banning plastic bags, what the environmental movement should be doing is designing its replacement. But what we actually get is some vague handwaving about cloth bags. Then each grocery comes up with some simple bag that has no environmental basis but is just designed for that particular grocery to swim a little better in the sea of competition. The bigger markets seek as usual to dominate the market with their particular bags covered all over with their logos. Will the next step be the drive to monopolize the cloth bag market the way that automobiles and appliances make proprietary parts that no one else can use? Who knows? Without planning, the future is wide open, but for sure, all the thinking will be based on money and influence, not on the good of the planet.

I am not going to revisit the “cloth bag controversy” again here, but for those who can't imagine what could be simpler than a cloth bag, let me just assure you there are dozens of special considerations that affect the impact of bag design on resource usage. Think about their actual usage, in practice. In ten years will we be reading about a ban on some cloth bags? Their “toxic” inks? Their plastic materials?

With the methyl bromide ban, we have an additional element. Not only is the atmosphere and the life it touches (including humans) forced to absorb thousands of tons of a poison but somewhere else there is a manufacturing facility taking in railcars of various materials to make that poison in the first place and churning out more railcars of chemical “waste”. When MeBr was banned in 1990, that whole agricultural practices vacuum was wide open to be filled by the first candidate for a replacement. One of the critical facts was that the ban was based on the ozone layer so that something equally poisonous, but kinder to ozone could be accepted. And this did indeed happen.

The moment was ripe for research into new ways of growing strawberries and the other crops involved. Were the universities swept up into a new research program to find the best way to grow crops without methyl bromide? Did the state develop or convert a new research center to find the best alternative to a problematic poison application? Was the worldwide permaculture movement tapped for effective methods? Of course not! The window was seen not as an opportunity but as a problem! How was the question framed? What will replace methyl bromide? With framing like that, there was only one possible outcome. A chemical company would introduce a new pesticide and start the process of complaint and lawsuit and ban all over again. Along the way there would be the usual complement of cancers and asthma and all the rest of the illnesses.

The article tells us that methyl iodide is now being withdrawn. I could ask the same questions about this opportunity too but why bother? The framing will be the same as always. What will replace methyl iodide? There is too much money in selling a product. It is much more profitable to exchange a railcar of something – anything – for a check, than to figure out how to create value from an intelligent approach to growing food and protecting the planet. Will the pressure be on to bring back methyl bromide?

All is not negative however. David Bacon, the author and a respected writer on labor issues, points out that the Pesticide Action Network is finally talking about designing a future without pesticides. A farmer is quoted as saying that growing strawberries without pesticides is easier than growers suppose. But this kind of thinking is placed at the end of the article, like the aside we know it is. The big money is on another half million tons of some pesticide before the next ban.

Notes: <http://truth-out.org/news/item/10322-watsonville-teachers-and-students-take-on-methyl-iodide-pesticide>

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