

# GOVERNMENT APPLIES FOR STRYCHNINE BAN REVERSAL

By Joyce Hildebrand, AWA Conservation Specialist

The Alberta government has applied for federal permission to reintroduce a lethal 2 percent liquid concentration of strychnine to kill ground squirrels that are “infesting” certain areas of Alberta. Strychnine is acutely toxic to all species, including humans. Although the two main areas affected are Central Alberta and the Westlock area northwest of Edmonton, the request is for the entire province.

In 1992 Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada restricted availability of strychnine to 0.4 percent ready-to-use impregnated bait and eliminated the sale to end users of the much more powerful 2 percent liquid strychnine concentrate. Both provincial and federal governments were concerned about risks to human health and the environment, and Health Canada used reports of unintentional and intentional poisonings of domestic pets and wildlife in their re-evaluation of strychnine use.

If the 2 percent strychnine ban is removed in Alberta, the “incidental poisonings” could have devastating effects on numerous species at risk in our province, including the burrowing owl, swift fox, and ferruginous hawk. In its 2005 “Re-evaluation of Strychnine Document,” Health Canada’s Pest Management Regulatory Agency (PMRA) reported that “strychnine poses a high to very high acute risk... to species that prey on or scavenge animals that have been poisoned by strychnine.” However, despite its conclusion that “[t]he current use of strychnine to control ground squirrels is a concern from an environmental perspective,” the PMRA proposed “that the use of [ready-to-use] strychnine to control ground squirrels be maintained for the short term.” Although less toxic and more economical chemicals are available for use, they are more time-consuming and less effective, so strychnine remains the control tool of choice.

In March 2007 Health Canada published an “Update on the Re-evaluation of Strychnine,” concluding the following: “Possible serious adverse effects to human health and the



*The Richardson's ground squirrel is considered a keystone species on the prairies because its presence is central to the continued existence of the entire ecosystem.*

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environment were the basis of the 1992 decision to restrict the availability of 2 percent liquid concentrate strychnine.... Restricting user access only to 0.4 percent strychnine bait formulations was considered at that time, and is still considered to be, a prudent approach.” Five months later, in August 2007, Health Canada’s PMRA granted emergency use of 2 percent strychnine in Saskatchewan for a one-year period.

Health Canada’s ruling in Saskatchewan, and Alberta’s request for a similar approval, come as the project of PMRA’s Richardson Ground Squirrel Integrated Pest Management Steering Committee nears completion. Established in 2002, this committee has been researching ground squirrel control methods and is to provide advice on sustainable control of this species on the prairies. Their report is to be completed in 2008. Health Canada’s 2007 update, referred to above, states: “A final decision on the use of strychnine will be made after consideration of the ongoing work by a national expert committee to identify, develop and promote a pest management control strategy for Richardson’s ground squirrels.” The department appears to have jumped the gun with the approval in Saskatchewan.

AWA opposes the reintroduction of 2 percent liquid strychnine sales to end users, a short-term management “solution” that threatens the health of humans and wildlife, and could have negative effects on our water and land as well. Most of Alberta’s species at risk are prairie-dependent – approving the strychnine request would increase the growing threats to their existence. More sustainable approaches might include improved range management (overgrazing increases ground squirrel habitat) and providing habitat for predators of small mammals. For example, ground squirrels constitute nearly 90 percent of the ferruginous hawk’s diet in Alberta – while raising their young, one pair consumes an average of 480 ground squirrels.

Please consider expressing your opinion about the reintroduction of 2 percent liquid strychnine. AWA encourages you to contact the following:

- your MLA and MP
- Liberal MLA Hugh MacDonald, Shadow Minister of Agriculture and Food
- Agriculture and Food Minister George Groeneveld
- Health Canada Minister Tony Clement