



Changing Homeowner's Lawn Care Behavior

To Reduce Nutrient Losses in New England's Urbanizing Watersheds

Julia Peterson¹, Brian Eisenhauer², Karen Filchak³, Marion Gold⁴, Karl Guillard³, Jurij Homziak⁵, Laura Wilson⁶

¹ University of New Hampshire, ² Plymouth State University, ³ University of Connecticut, ⁴ University of Rhode Island, ⁵ University of Vermont, ⁶ University of Maine

Situation

Like many regions of the US, New England is experiencing high rates of conversion of formerly agricultural and forested lands to residential development. Land stewardship and land uses are changing and increasing the potential for nonpoint source pollution, including excess nutrients, to enter local surface and ground waters. This project combines social science and environmental science to investigate "who" has the most influence over residential lawn care practices of do-it-yourselfers and "what" should be done to minimize excess nutrient runoff from lawns. It then builds educational outreach based on those investigations. Project time period is September 2006 through August 2009.

Objectives

Research

Plant Science

- Establish regionally appropriate fertilizer and alternative lawn nutrient recommendations.
- Evaluate new soil and tissue tests for response to N fertilizer.

Behavioral Science

- Explore primary drivers of lawn care practices and investigate barriers and benefits to adoption of water-quality friendly ones.
- Examine relative measures of trust and contact for various lawn care information sources and determine effectiveness of trained opinion-shapers to influence practices.

Education

- Students learn about the confluence of social and environmental science including regionally appropriate nutrient application, cutting edge social science research methods and analytical techniques, and strategies for effective outreach.

Extension

- Opinion shapers increase knowledge about nutrient effects and recommendations and learn to use soil based N test.
- Neighborhood participants increase knowledge of recommended nutrient application or non-application. Also increase willingness, commitment, and adoption of new practices.

Anticipated Results

Plant Science Research:

The project will define a critical level of soil amino sugar-N, active carbon, and/or extractable nitrate that can be used to partition lawns into two classes - those with low probability of response to N fertilizer and those with higher probability of response to N fertilizer. Lawns in the former class are deemed to be more of a threat to water quality if fertilized than if not. Data will help to develop a better method to guide N fertilization for turf.

Behavioral Science Research:

In-depth interviews of lawn care opinion-shapers will produce qualitative data for use in the design questionnaire and the Extension activities. The results will illustrate social regularities identified in the research.

A questionnaire delivered to a random sample of 300 residents in five communities from five different states will produce quantitative data that will be statistically analyzed. The results will identify important information about sources of lawn care information, beliefs about practices, and barriers and benefits to more water-quality friendly practices that can be used in the design and delivery of Extension programs.

Progress to Date

- Advisory team was assembled, met in November '06 and October '07 and spoke in summer '07.
- Plant science team reviewed, assessed, revised, sorted and compiled turf fertilization recommendations for N and P within region. Distributed revised recommendations to advisory team for review.
- Plant science team conducted evaluation of amino-sugar nitrate test, labile soil carbon test, and extractable soil nitrate test to determine relationship between turf response and these parameters. Completed collection and analysis of soil and plant tissue samples from 2007. Analytical and statistical analyses of samples and results continue toward completion.
- Social science team reviewed additional literature; trained graduate student in correct interview and data analysis technique; developed, reviewed and revised interview questions; conducted interviews of 50+ opinion leaders in 5 states; and analyzed qualitative data from interviews.
- Social science team located and secured professional sampling. Drafted and reviewed survey questions for neighborhood residents. Developed research instrument-5 versions. Designed survey administration using the Total Design Method. Created database for data analysis. Questionnaire coding and entry into database complete. Statistical analysis is underway.
- Several members of project team presented at regional conference in July '07, [Green-Blue Summit](#).