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Changing Homeowner's Lawn Care Behavior to Reduce Nutrient Losses in New England's Urbanizing Watersheds: The Role of Social Science

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Abstract:

Nutrient losses from common lawn care practices have been identified as significant contributors to Non Point Source Pollution in New England's watersheds. In response to this issue, Extension programs in the region are focused on attempting to get homeowners to voluntarily reduce the negative impacts of lawn care practices on their watersheds. However, little research exists addressing either the social dynamics involved or established means of achieving pro-environmental behavioral change with lawn care practices. This research seeks to address these issues by providing empirically tested research, to enhance and direct Extension educational programs, as well as provide a framework for other regions to adapt or duplicate. Social science research was conducted in five targeted key communities to identify primary drivers of homeowners' lawn care choices and behaviors by examining the relative strength of various influences including environmental values, attitudes and norms, and the relative influence of different types of informational messages. To best understand the social dynamics of lawn care decisions this project employed a modified form of the theory of planned behavior to conceptually structure the research and guide the data collection and analysis process. A methodological triangulation approach was taken utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide breadth and validity to the research. The findings from this research have been applied to the design and delivery of Extension education programs and social marketing efforts intended to affect landowners' behavior. This poster presents the theory and methods used in the research, and examples of key findings for the creation of successful outreach and education.

Impact Statement:

There are several key outputs as a result of this research including extensive datasets on previously unexplored issues and substantive scientific reports. Most importantly this research generated information that enhances the understanding of lawn care decision making and informs outreach/education using sophisticated social science. This information has been used to develop new outreach and education programs throughout New England to protect water quality. The project staff worked collaboratively with six different universities (PSU, UNH, UConn, URI, UVM, and UMaine) across five states in the region and developed strong partnerships; further leveraging the resources that make this project possible. These partnerships involve working closely with a steering committee of stakeholders, including extension staff, business leaders, lawn care providers, and residents, who have informed the project design and participated in implementation. The utilization of sophisticated social science has proven to be essential for the creation and direction of outreach and education efforts, and that understanding the human dimensions of water quality issues, such as lawn care practices, is crucial to creating real and desired outcomes.

Category: Human Dimensions

Type of Presentation: Poster Presentation