

Changing Homeowner's Lawn Care Behavior



To Reduce Nutrient Losses in New England's Urbanizing Watersheds

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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.

Year 2 Progress

- Advisory team met in person during fall 2007 and via three videoconferences in spring 2008.
- Plant science team refined water quality-friendly turf nutrient recommendations resulting in a regional extension publication. Team participates in outreach planning and design.
- Plant science team conducted evaluation of amino-sugar nitrogen and extractable soil nitrate tests as predictors of turf growth and quality. Completed collection and analysis of 2007 soil and plant samples. Completed analytical and statistical analyses of samples. Shared results with advisory group. Presented preliminary results at ASA-CSSA-SSSA national conference. Second season of testing and analysis is underway.
- Social science team selected professional sampling company and prepared survey questions. Developed 5 versions of research instrument. Created database for data analysis. Completed questionnaire coding and entry. Administered survey using Total Design Method. Compiled results. Completed statistical analysis. Shared and discussed results and implications with advisory group. Wrote a report. Preparing a white paper. Participating in outreach planning, design and evaluation.
- Extension team incorporated findings from turf and social science into existing state materials, new state outreach products and is preparing three new regional outreach products.
- Nine students (BS to PhD) have been involved in project thus far.