

**Is Halifax's pesticide bylaw working? You bet.**

In response to today's article by James Cowan, "Toronto considers weaker pesticide law: Lawn-care workers descend on city hall," one wonders why anyone would ask an industry spokesperson, whose coalition is funded by lawn care companies with a vested interest in profits, for an assessment of how the Halifax bylaw is working? Good reporting should have guided Mr. Cowan to more impartial and authoritative sources.

Lorraine Van Haastreht claims both that "retail sales tripled" in the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM), but also that the city "lacks the resources to monitor citizens' use" of pesticides. Which is it? And how would she know if, as the OAG has pointed out, Canada and the Slovak Republics are the only countries that don't keep track of pesticide sales?

So what's the real story? In 2003 much to their credit, one of the larger HRM garden centres, Lakeland Plant World, decided to stop carrying pesticides this season. These decisions wouldn't be made if garden pesticide sales were booming. Bags of pesticides seem to be just sitting unsold in a number of retail outlets. All of Loblaws spring 2003 promotional flyers for Halifax featured pesticide-free products on both their front and back covers with high praise for the pesticide bylaw and the wishes of the community. Congratulations, Loblaws, for being neighbourly and a good corporate citizen.

The biggest challenge to the bottom line for law-abiding lawncare Businesses in Halifax may in fact be that a few of the wealthiest companies seem to have trouble following bylaw regulations or even telling the truth, sometimes failing to suggest non-toxic alternatives, and sometimes misleading homeowners claiming that chemical pesticides like Carbaryl (remember Bhopal?) are "organic." Organic landscape accreditation, a much needed next step, would put a quick stop to this.\* Other companies {franchises}, in contrast, have gone with organic maintenance programs early and over 70 % of their customers in the Halifax area apparently had switched over to them even before the bylaw came into full effect. It also appears to be a good climate for new small business starts, since more lawn care revenue stays in the community instead of leaving the area for the head offices of chemical companies elsewhere.

Industry frequently badmouths Halifax's pesticide bylaw in the rest of Canada while whispering sweet nothings to HRM Council when in Nova Scotia. The reality is that the bylaw is alive and well in spite of this. The permit process has been refined and improved each year, and public education - so essential to any adjustment period - will be more detailed and complete in the coming season. The pesticide bylaw in Halifax (Bylaw P-800) is working and continues to have very broad support from the public.

One good measure of this is that people who are exquisitely sensitive to pesticide exposures have noticed a real improvement in their health due to the widespread reduction in landscape pesticide use in their communities. They are now able to travel around their neighbourhoods more freely Without getting sick. There is also an increase in the number of homeowners who have replaced some or all of their lawn with interesting shrubs and landscape plantings that don't need the care and watering that lawns require, so residents can sit back and relax with no mowing. Birdwatchers have noted a general increase in songbird numbers due possibly to increased food and improved clutch success.

The Canadian Centre for Pollution Prevention, C2P2, has singled out Halifax's pesticide bylaw as one of the 10 most effective (i.e., lowest in cost, with the greatest progress in moving the community towards natural alternatives and away from risky chemical pesticides) causing C2P2 to affirm that "Pesticide Bylaws Work!"

Last season saw some problems with lawn chinch bugs in selective neighbourhoods, particularly areas of new housing developments with thin soils, and accompanying this a corresponding increase occurred in requests for permits to use pesticides. These accounted for only about 1-3% of the properties in the municipality, so this affected a relatively minor geographical area. Permits are not granted by the municipality for herbicide use at all.

Most of the requests came from only 3 lawn care companies who may have been less well prepared to maintain their properties using the sustainable methods that other lawn care companies were using. The following website may be useful to residents and possibly to other communities in addressing some of the gaps in the preparation of landscape care providers:  
[www.versicolor.ca/lawns](http://www.versicolor.ca/lawns) .

The Halifax Regional Municipality has continued to refine the already good performance of the bylaw. Recent improvements have been made by Council this spring, some of which came about as a result of last season's experience.

- \* Steps are being taken to require greater soil depth (and the addition of some municipal compost) in new housing construction areas.

- \* Residents will receive better instruction in a variety of effective non-toxic steps they can follow to solve lawn pest problems before applying for a permit to apply pesticides (which in many cases may prove to be unnecessary). For example, using a shop vacuum on areas affected by chinch bugs is 100% effective, removing all the eggs, all the nymphs, and all of the adults (according to the Wolfville NS Parks Department).

- \* Pro-active education for neighbourhoods that had problems last year will take place for the first time this year; residents will be contacted with important preventive information early in the season, preparing them BEFORE any pest problems occur.

- \* A website is being created by HRM to facilitate the bylaw function with respect to the inspection/permitting/education process. It will also improve the ability of the municipality to compile data on a variety of factors within and between growing seasons, including the experience of individual properties over time, as well as trends within neighbourhoods.

- \* Any bylaw violation fines will be handled more smoothly by a new ticketing process similar to traffic tickets (SOTS). Violation reporting is complaint driven, which helps to keep costs very low.

- \* Halifax Regional Council unanimously reaffirmed on April 6, 2004, the importance of the inspection/permitting process being handled by a competent independent 3rd party (i.e., not industry). Council has also resisted industry requests to build Integrated Pest Management (IPM) into the bylaw.

This is a system which relies on pesticides and is backed by lawn care industry groups such as Landscape Ontario and Landscape Nova Scotia Horticultural Trades Association (LNSHTA), as well as U.S. pesticide interests.

Halifax's pesticide bylaw performance just keeps getting better and better, thanks to leadership provided by HRM's Mayor, Council and staff. So take the next industry attack you read with a grain of salt. It may come from someone paid to protect profits rather than the truth or the public. The real unvarnished truth is that our municipality deserves a wheelbarrow load of credit for the excellent job they are doing and the community is solidly behind them.

Helen Jones MSc, EdD  
Past Member, Pesticide Bylaw Advisory Committee  
Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM)  
Board Member, Real Alternatives to Toxins in the Environment (RATE)

\*For more information on the benefits of organic landscape standards and accreditation programs as well as communities using them see:

SOUL List 2: Landscape Pest Control Products (West Coast, Canada)  
[www.organiclandcare.org/standard/products\\_pest.htm](http://www.organiclandcare.org/standard/products_pest.htm)  
SOUL (Society of Organic Urban Land Care Professionals)

National Standard CAN/CGSB-32.310 - Organic Agriculture  
([www.pwgsc.gc.ca/cgsb/032\\_310/standard-e.html](http://www.pwgsc.gc.ca/cgsb/032_310/standard-e.html)) Canadian General Standards Board. Download the CGSB Organic Standard.

Organic Landscape Alliance (OLA) - Canada (see their factsheets)  
<http://www.organiclandscape.org>

The Long Island Neighborhood Network's 4 Steps to a Toxic Free Lawn  
<http://www.longislandnn.org/events/4steps.htm>

Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI)  
OMRI Generic Materials List, and Brand Name Products List (U.S.)  
[www.omri.org/](http://www.omri.org/)

The 5th Annual Organic Turf Trade Show A Huge Success  
[http://www.longislandnn.org/events/trade\\_show.htm](http://www.longislandnn.org/events/trade_show.htm)

NOFA-Northeast Organic Farming Assoc.(US) has accredited 45 org.  
Landscapers since 2002.

Standards for Organic Land Care:  
Practices for Design and Maintenance of Ecological Landscapes  
<http://www.organiclandcare.net/publications/index.php>

Thu 20 May 2004

National Post

Toronto considers weaker pesticide law: Lawn-care workers descend on city hall

By James Cowan

TORONTO - Toronto city council yesterday began a new fight over the city's pesticide by-law, as the lawn-care industry argued the ban is ineffective and will only cost jobs.

The city prohibited most pesticide as of April 1, joining Halifax, Quebec City, Hudson, Que., and other communities with similar restrictions. But Toronto is now considering significantly lessening its restrictions and allowing pesticide use if 5% or more of a lawn is covered with weeds.

More than 100 lawn-care workers packed the public gallery at city hall yesterday. Many wore bright green shirts emblazoned with words such as "responsible," "fairness," and "fruit trees." Far fewer members supported the ban with T-shirts reading "Dandelions don't cause cancer."

A lawn-care industry spokeswoman argued the ban will be ineffective because the city cannot legally prevent retailers from selling pesticides and lacks the resources to monitor citizens' use.

"In Halifax, lawn-care operators lost their businesses. But retail sales tripled. So people are not going to tolerate their property being devastated," Lorraine Van Haastrecht said.

She also argued a strict ban will cost 2,000 jobs in the city. "We're just asking for a reasonable solution. Why put us out of business?"

Councillor Joe Mihevc, however, argued health concerns trumped economic ones.

"Using pesticides in downtown Toronto is not a way to do business. It's not protecting our community health," Mr. Mihevc said.

Barbara Yaffe, the acting medical officer of health, told councillors she believes pesticides pose a significant health risk by increasing rates of cancer, causing birth defects and contributing to learning and reproductive problems.

"At this point, I believe the evidence is similar to what we had for smoking years ago. In 1964, the United States Surgeon-General presented his report on tobacco. It took 30 more years before we could definitively say there was a causative effect. But the evidence today is looking that way for pesticides," Dr. Yaffe said.

"We know there's a significant health risk and we know it's preventable."

Several councillors, including Case Ootes and Mark Grimes, challenged Dr. Yaffe's conclusions, saying there is no scientific consensus. Toronto Public Health and the Ontario College of Family Physicians support the ban, while Health Canada approves of limited pesticide use.

Yesterday represented a new battle in the ongoing war over pesticide restrictions in Toronto. Council approved the ban in May, 2003, after heated debate. The new law allows for pesticide use to combat public-health risks such as West Nile virus or infestations. However, council did not set specific thresholds for when pesticides would be allowed. Instead, it asked city staff for further advice on implementing the by-law. The report from Shirley Hoy, the chief administrative officer, proposed an outright ban on herbicides used to kill dandelions and other weeds. It also suggested continued study to properly define infestation levels for grubs and insects.

However, an amendment introduced by Mr. Ootes at a committee meeting last week significantly altered the report, suggesting spot spraying be allowed if 5% to 10% of a lawn is covered with weeds.

Toronto city council will vote on changes to the by-law today.

Illustration:

\* Black & White Photo: The Canadian Press / Toronto council is considering whether to amend a 2003 by-law to allow spraying if 5% to 10% of a lawn is covered with weeds.

Edition: All but Toronto

Story Type: Business; Statistics

Note: [jcowan@nationalpost.com](mailto:jcowan@nationalpost.com)