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LAWN PESTICIDES: AN UNACCEPTABLE RISK

Editor's note: The following information was published, ©2002, by Grassroots Environmental Education, whose supporting organizations include Audubon, CCE (Citizens Campaign for the Environment), CHEC (Children's Health Environmental Coalition), NCAMP/Beyond Pesticides, and NYCAP (NY Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides).

Despite growing evidence linking lawn and garden pesticides with serious human health problems and environmental harm, the use of these chemicals continues to grow each year. Homeowners, in pursuit of the aesthetically perfect lawn and encouraged by advertising, use three times more pesticides per acre than the average farmer. Especially in densely populated suburban areas, this release of chemical toxins into the environment significantly impacts our air and water quality, and, ultimately, our health. *Several types of cancer, neurological diseases, and birth defects have all been associated with exposure to common lawn care pesticides.*

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "all pesticides are toxic to some degree... and most pesticides have *not been adequately tested* to determine their effects on people or the environment." According to NY State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, "pesticides pose health risks, even when used and applied in full compliance with manufacturers' recommendations and legal requirements."

Children at Risk. Children are uniquely vulnerable to pesticides due to a variety of physiological and behavioral factors. Scientists believe that even a single exposure during a critical period of development can cause acute or long-term health problems. Children, unlike adults, spend much of their time playing outdoors on the grass and indoors on carpeting where lawn chemicals have been brought into the house on shoes. Once indoors, chemicals remain active longer, as they are usually formulated to break down in sunlight, soil, and water. According to Dr. Phil Landrigan, M.D., Director of the Center for Children's Health and the Environment at Mount Sinai School of Medicine: "Children have greater exposure than adults. Pound for pound of body weight, they drink more, eat more, and breathe more than adults. Growing and developing processes are easily interrupted... If reproductive development is diverted by pesticides, the resulting dysfunction can be permanent and irreversible... As a pedia-

trician, I urge all parents to reduce pesticide use as much as possible, especially lawn services. Children's health is more important than a few weeds."

Environmental Impact. Domestic usage of pesticides now accounts for the majority of wildlife poisonings reported to the EPA. David Pimentel, Professor of Entomology at Cornell University, estimates that seven million wild birds are killed each year due to the aesthetic use of pesticides by homeowners. Most pesticides are generally not species specific, killing non-targeted beneficial insects and important pollinators and food sources in their wake. Accidental pesticide applications or "drift" into aquatic areas is a common problem, causing contamination or loss of an important food source for other animals as well as humans.

According to the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation's Ward B. Stone, "Birds dying on lawns from pesticides are a strong warning of the potential risks these chemicals pose to people and pets. As a wildlife pathologist, I see firsthand the carnage caused by the unnecessary use of lawn and garden pesticides."

Making the Transition to Natural Lawn Care. Making the transition from chemical treatments to natural lawn maintenance may take a little time, but putting it into practice is easier than you think. Soil health should always be the primary concern, because years of heavy pesticide use may have destroyed many beneficial organisms that provided natural pest control, soil aeration, and plant nutrition. Here are a few suggestions to get you started: A soil rebuilding and natural lawn program should include aeration and compost applications, seeding with grasses best suited to your area, corn gluten for pre-emergence weed control, biological controls for insects if necessary, and one or more applications annually of a slow-release nitrogen *organic* fertilizer (commercial fertilizers frequently contain toxic herbicides, such as 2,4-D). Other important steps to take are mowing high at 2 to 3 inches, deep watering early in the morning, and performing periodic soil tests to determine needed amendments, such as lime or rock dust. If you use a lawn care service, look for a company that follows a program such as the one described above. Be wary of IPM (Integrated Pest Management) programs, which often include the use of toxic pesticides. Your decision to stop using pesticides benefits not only your immediate family, but your neighbors, pets, and wildlife in your community.

For information on safe lawn care and nontoxic alternatives, and a list of organic landscapers in your area, go to www.grassrootsinfo.org. [*Editor's interruption:* You can also contact the Neighborhood Network's Pesticide Alternatives Project at 541-4321 and ask for a copy of their annual "Organic Lawn Resource Directory" booklet.]

Web Sites to Visit for Pesticide Info: www.pesticide.org (NCAP; click on "Publications and Information"), www.beyondpesticides.org (NCAMP; click on "Info Services"), and www.pesticideinfo.org (PANNA; click on "Open Database" and enter pesticide name in "Search" box under #2).

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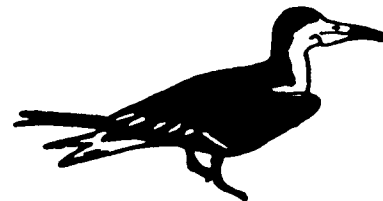
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