

The Watershed Partnership, Inc.

QUINNIPIAC RIVER FUND FINAL REPORT- SPRING 2012

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Group/Organization Name: Watershed Partnership, Inc.

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Project Name: The Safe Grounds Campaign

Grant Number: 20110077

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Please respond to the following statements:

1. Give a brief summary of what your group/organization's 2011 project is.

- ♦ The Safe Grounds Campaign works in a variety of ways to protect human health and the environment and to reduce non-point source pollution from toxic lawn pesticides and synthetic fertilizers in the Quinnipiac River watershed (QRW).
- ♦ The Watershed Partnership conducted a survey of school pesticide records in the QRW. These records are mandated by law to be kept for 5 years. Records were reviewed for accessibility, comprehensibility and conformity with State law.
- ♦ The Watershed Partnership helped non-compliant cooperative schools to bring records into compliance with State law.
- ♦ The Watershed Partnership interviewed and educated facility managers in school districts during the survey site visit. Help was offered for problems encountered with organic turf care and the health risks of toxic lawn pesticides to groundskeepers and children were discussed.
- ♦ The Watershed Partnership created, enhanced, and maintained an internet-based Organic Turf Forum in collaboration with Connecticut NOFA. This forum is directed at groundskeepers to provide education about organic turf care.
- ♦ The Watershed Partnership is working in a variety of ways to protect the current ban on toxic lawn pesticides on all elementary and middle schools and day care centers. We are also trying to lay the groundwork to extend the ban to high schools and all municipal parks and grounds.

2. *What has been accomplished to date? Please frame your answer in terms of attainment of the outcomes framed in your proposal.*

A) **Outcomes – Examination of school grounds pesticide records:**

- ♦ A list was developed of all school districts, schools, superintendent of schools, and facility managers along with their contact information.
- ♦ The school grounds pesticide records from 6 school districts in the QRW were checked by on-site visits.
- ♦ 85% of the area of the QRW is covered by these 6 districts.
- ♦ 100% of all districts visited knew that there was a pesticide ban in place for elementary and middle schools.
- ♦ 100% of all districts visited knew that pesticide records needed to be kept for 5 years.
- ♦ Records were evaluated for:
 - Accessibility: 40% had accessible records. 60% had records that were incomplete, missing, or hard to retrieve.
 - Comprehensibility: 20% had comprehensible records. In 100% of the school districts it was difficult to calculate the actual amount of pesticides per unit area or the application rate. Records gave trade names of products and not the actual active ingredients making it difficult to determine the toxicity of the active ingredient. There were also occasional internal inconsistencies in records and in the manner of reporting the data.
 - Compliance: Only 40% of school districts had records in compliance with law. 60% were non-compliant.

Please note that to conduct this survey at least one site visit was made to each school district. However, to set up that appointment with the correct person, explain the survey, to follow up, and to help retrieve records from many school district offices or private contractors such as True Green, it took at least: 6 letters, 17 emails, and 93 phone calls.

B) **Outcome – Interview, educate, and help cooperative groundskeepers improve health and safety by organic turf care and foster a more positive attitude among facility managers towards organic care.**

As part of the lawn pesticide record review survey, the Watershed Partnership had the opportunity to speak with the person in charge of school grounds and learn about their issues with regard to organic turf care. This was the first year of the ban on synthetic pesticides at elementary and middle schools. During the survey period we were able to provide them with the benefit of the Watershed Partnership's experience in working for successful organic turf care and discuss the health risks of toxic lawn pesticides to children, the environment, and to the applicators themselves.

Many towns that used pesticides before the ban went into full effect on July 1, 2010 did not use the 3-year moratorium on athletic fields to transition to organic care. In most instances they did not do anything to restore the health of the soil degraded by years of applications of high nitrogen fertilizers and pesticides. When the ban went into effect, they just stopped using pesticides. As a result many fields deteriorated and the groundskeepers complained that organic care did not work. The actual case is that they did not do proper organic care that is based on the restoration of the soil to a healthy biological state. We informed them of the proper procedures and in a few instances tried to help them with resources such as obtaining screened compost.

Doing the survey and helping them come into compliance with state law gave us entry and some cooperation as we could be seen as trying to help them with their record keeping. The general conclusion to the interviews is that what makes organic care successful is not simply training and know-how. The most important ingredient is attitude. You only have success if you really want to succeed. Prior to this year, the Watershed Partnership believed that more training was what was needed. To change groundskeepers attitudes they need to:

- ♦ Believe the health risks to children and care about this
- ♦ Believe the health risks to themselves
- ♦ Believe the risks to the environment and care
- ♦ To have their job in jeopardy if their fields deteriorate

This will only happen if enough citizens in the towns are activated, vigilant about compliance with the law, and put pressure on the town and school district to make sure that organic care is done correctly.

C) Outcomes – Create and maintain an internet forum on organic turf care.

The forum is up and running. The challenge continues to be how to get more groundskeepers to visit the site. The Watershed Partnership has put in content and best organic practices based on Connecticut NOFA's Organic Turf Handbook (which the Watershed Partnership helped edit). It remains to be seen how we can best use this site. Again, just training and knowledge about best practices is not going to change attitudes – organic turf care is much more than not using pesticides.

D) Outcomes – Protect the existing ban and set the stage for extending the lawn pesticide ban to all Connecticut Schools and Municipal Lawns.

The Watershed Partnership is working towards reducing the use of toxic lawn pesticides in Connecticut. The lawn pesticide school ban was not compromised in the last legislative session although pro-pesticide forces tried to have the ban reversed. This legislative session the ban is again at risk of reversal and we expect that this will be the case each year. Pesticides are a multi-billion dollar industry with many lobbyists and considerable influence. The Watershed Partnership would like to work towards extending the ban to Connecticut parks and municipal grounds and to give towns the right to regulate lawn pesticides more strictly than state law. We are working to create support for these initiatives with other environmental and health organizations and increasing our outreach and efforts at grassroots organizing.

E) Outcomes- Organizing support in the QRW for the school pesticide ban and other lawn pesticide initiatives.

The Watershed Partnership is laying the groundwork for legislative initiatives and to expand the use of organic products available for lawn care and this bill is in the legislature now. We are collaborating with other organization interested in this issue and building grassroots support for protecting and strengthening the existing ban. These groups include NOFA, Connecticut Sierra Club, Audubon Connecticut, Grassroots Environmental Education, Citizens Campaign for the Environment, and Environment and Human Health. We have been tabling at events in the QRW, talking to people, and collecting names of people willing to contact their legislators to help protect the ban and possibly working in their QRW towns. We are in the early stages of exploring how we can use social media and action alerts for grassroots activation in local school districts to have citizens advocate for, and follow up on, proper organic care of their town's fields. These people could also be activated for state-wide initiatives.