

The Watershed Partnership, Inc.

QUINNIPIAC RIVER FUND FINAL REPORT- SPRING 2013

Please complete and submit completed form via e-mail to dcanning@cfgnh.org at The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven by March 29, 2013.

Date: March 20, 2013

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Project Name: The Safe Grounds Campaign

Grant Number: 20120062

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Introduction:

The Watershed Partnership's Safe Grounds Campaign's goal is to reduce the use of toxic lawn pesticides in Connecticut. The Connecticut school pesticide ban that the Watershed Partnership helped pass, was a major step in this direction and helped protect the health of hundreds of thousands of children in Connecticut as well as protecting the environment.

Organic turf care, which we call "nontoxic care" is able to achieve safe and playable athletic fields and lawns without exposing children involuntarily to toxic chemicals and polluting our rivers, ground water and Long Island Sound.

1. Project and Outcomes:

A) In this grant cycle, the Watershed Partnership examined school lawn pesticide records in the Quinnipiac River Watershed (QRW) school districts. These records are mandated by law to be kept for 5 years.

The Watershed Partnership was looking at records for accessibility, comprehensibility, and conformity with state law. In all cases, when appropriate, we helped cooperative schools and school districts to improve record keeping to conform with Connecticut law.

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The majority of schools had incomplete records and only 40% had easily accessible records. Only 20% had easily comprehensible records. Most of the records did not have all the required data.

- B) To correlate records kept by the school with actual turf on athletic fields, we planned to visit and document the validity of pesticide use reported.

All public school athletic fields in the QRW were surveyed over the course of this grant. Based on the vegetation present, there was no evidence that pesticides were used. In Cheshire, where they are doing excellent nontoxic turf care, the fields looked excellent. The fields in other schools did not look very good. It seemed as if those responsible for turf care just stopped using toxic pesticides and were not doing proper nontoxic care. Cheshire is even doing nontoxic care on its high school fields that were not subject to the ban, yet they have achieved excellent results.

- C) The Watershed Partnership hoped to help QRW grounds keepers and facility managers have more attractive and safe fields and a positive attitude.

We have spent time speaking with groundskeepers and facility managers in the QRW to try to provide them with the benefit of the Watershed Partnership's experience in working for successful outcomes. We have listened to the issues they had and tried to address them. One issue is, as an example, is the control of grub infestations that can severely damage fields. We have spent considerable time on fieldwork, product research, and consultation with experts about the problem. This legislative session we have suggested legislation that will provide groundskeepers with the safe and effective alternatives should there be a serious risk of a field being severely damaged by grubs.

It should be noted that although towns had three years to transition to nontoxic turf care, in most instances they did nothing to restore the health of the soil that had been degraded by years of pesticide use and high nitrogen fertilizers. When the ban went into effect, they stopped using pesticides and then did nothing – they simply let their fields deteriorate so they could claim that nontoxic care does not work. This is due in part to wanting to maintain the easy practices that they know about, in part from pesticide industry pressure, in part from their professional organizations, and from lobbyists who want to see the ban on toxic pesticides reversed.

Success in nontoxic turf care is a matter of attitude and knowledge. The ones who want to achieve success, as in Cheshire, can achieve it. But unfortunately, most want to go back to the *status quo ante*. Those who want to learn proper care have had ample opportunity. Workshops and classes have been offered for several years, many of these at no cost. During the course of this grant two days of a free 45 minute consultation was offered with a leading expert in nontoxic turf care. Letters were sent to every school district and town facilities manager in all of Connecticut with follow up calls. Not one person signed up.

We are increasingly convinced that only external pressure by parents and interested citizens demanding proper nontoxic turf care for the schools is the only way that there will be a substantial increase in nontoxic successes.

- D) We set up an internet forum in collaboration with the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA) on nontoxic turf care hoping it would lead to a positive exchange of practical information and ideas.

The Watershed Partnership put in content on the site of best practices based on NOFA's Organic Turf Care Handbook that the Watershed Partnership helped edit. It is not yet interactive and it remains to be seen what the best use will be of this site. Due to the negative attitude of most school groundskeepers, it may be that it should be geared to professional companies that are doing pesticide free care.

- E) The Watershed Partnership started to organize support in QRW towns for the school pesticide ban and for other nontoxic turf care initiatives.

Last spring the Watershed Partnership had tables at many events in the QRW and we were able to speak with and collect contact information from many people so we could inform them about ways to protect the ban. In addition, these people agreed to contact their legislators about pesticide related bills.

Interestingly, most of the people did not have any idea that there was a ban on toxic lawn pesticides on school grounds in place to protect children and all were then upset that the ban was being threatened. Obviously, there needs to be more information out to the public.

The Watershed Partnership also tried experimenting with social media, but it yielded poor results. If we try again, we would work with an organization that had a large mailing list of interested citizens and the ability to send action alerts to their list.

We do not have the resources to hire a community grassroots specialist to organize parents and citizen activists. We feel that this work is necessary to put pressure on schools to have successful fields and protect the ban.

- F) The Watershed Partnership has worked intensively with other environmental and health organizations this past grant period. The pesticide industry is a multi-billion dollar enterprise with many lobbyists and much influence and reach.

A Connecticut Safe Grounds Coalition of many organizations has been formed to protect the current ban at schools. We are working with groups to extend the ban to high schools; to get legislation passed that would ban toxic pesticide use on all parks and municipal grounds; to ban fracking and fracking waste in CT (The QRW can be affected by fracking and fracking waste disposal; and to change the laws for penalties for spraying pesticides on the wrong property.

- G) The selection of New Haven as the site for the Beyond Pesticide national conference was because CT was the first state to have a lawn pesticide ban on school grounds. The Watershed Partnership's Executive Director, Jerry Silbert, received their environmental award for the year for his work in Connecticut. Unfortunately, There was very little publicity surrounding this event in Connecticut.
- H) We continue to add content to our website. The Safe Grounds Coalition has created a website for protecting the pesticide ban and EHHI has created a fracking website.

We thank the Quinnipiac River Fund for their support of the Watershed Partnership and for funding our work to protect health and the environment in the Quinnipiac River Watershed.