

Letter from Washington

Celebrating Organic Lawns Policy and Protecting Our Victories

This issue represents a celebration and a warning. First, the celebration. The passage of organic lawn care legislation in Montgomery County, Maryland in October represents a high water mark in the history of pesticide restrictions and the growth in organic land management policy. The Council adopted a law that defines allowable materials in lawn care or turf management on public and private land as organic-compatible. The language bans hazardous pesticides, recognizing that, similar to secondhand smoke, the use of pesticides has community-wide impact—in this case, on the health of children and residents, wildlife (including bees and pollinators), and the protection of waterways (including the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries). The photos on the front page and the inside article of this issue capture the degree of community involvement, collaboration with legislators, and effectiveness of a community-based organization, Safe Grow Montgomery. The photos also capture the reality that the issue of protection from pesticides and the adoption of policies is a family affair. And, of course, Beyond Pesticides staff is honored to have assisted with information that supported local action.

Effecting the Transition

We have begun training sessions with the staff of the Montgomery County Parks Department that teaches land managers about the paradigm shift in managing healthy soils, as opposed to current systems which focus on killing insects and weeds. The focus on building soil biology that supports healthier, more resilient plants, and soils that generate nitrogen naturally and retain moisture and atmospheric carbon offers new ways of thinking about not only eliminating toxic inputs, but creating a community that nurtures the local ecology and contributes to reducing the pace of global climate change. On a related note, we released a video, *Making the Switch* (<http://bit.ly/makingtheswitch>), of a local hardware store in York, Maine, Eldredge Lumber and [Ace] Hardware, that has transformed its lawn and garden department to become organic-compatible, helping customers understand the importance of the living soil and ways to build the biomass with soil amendments and compost.

Industry Pushback

Now, the warning. There is much work ahead. The chemical lawn care industry is not happy about this new law, although a state trade group leader testified that he could offer organic lawn care services if his customers wanted. The Parks Department has been a vociferous opponent of organic management of playing fields and at one point testified that it could not manage its sites without neonicotinoids (the systemic pesticides linked to the decline in bees and other pollinators) and glyphosate (Roundup/classified as a carcinogen by the International Agency for Research on Cancer).

Maine Bill to Take Away Local Authority

If there was any doubt that our efforts would be challenged, a legislator in Maine, State Rep. Jeff Timberlake, has indicated that he will be introducing in January a bill to take away the authority of (preempt) local

jurisdictions in Maine to restrict pesticides more stringently than the state. This would overturn the landmark ordinance in Ogunquit, passed by 60% on a ballot initiative last year, to allow only organic-compatible products to be used for public and private lawn care in town.

Keeping Organic Strong and Growing

As concern builds to establish organic management practices in towns and cities across the country, we are faced with a constant challenge to protect the meaning of organic and build the organic marketplace. As an example, we write about our lawsuit in this issue, *The Case Against Contaminated Compost*, to hold USDA accountable to the law, the *Organic Foods Production Act*, by not allowing pesticide contamination of compost permitted in organic production. USDA in 2010 adopted a rule change without public hearing and comment—a serious violation in government decision making. There are numerous process violations that we are working on like this—reversal of the procedures by which allowed synthetic substances in organic are reviewed, and the allowance of hydroponics, as two major examples.

Equally insidious is Whole Foods Market's *Responsibly Grown* rating system, which creates "good, better, best" criteria that does not utilize organic practices, values and principles as its baseline. We ask in this issue, *When Sustainable Is Less than Organic, Is it Responsibly Grown?* So, consumers are faced with a decision at point of purchase—some food grown with chemicals like neurotoxic insecticides (such as chlorpyrifos, diazinon, carbaryl), cancer causing herbicides like glyphosate, and bee killing insecticides in the neonicotinoid family, and others, can be rated "best," and products labeled USDA certified organic, which prohibits all these toxic chemicals in agricultural production, can be rated as "good or better." Similarly, in our piece *Tea Steeped in Toxics*, the Rainforest Alliance certification program allows hazardous pesticides that are prohibited in organic production.

In a perfect synergy, consumers and farmers created the organic market. Congress codified it in law with a magnificent system of review and independent oversight by the National Organic Standards Board, and put the program at USDA. The agency was not friendly to organic when the law was passed and today is undermining its integrity by circumventing public process. Meanwhile, those wanting to get into the organic market because of premium prices are not always on board with the standards and values that gave birth to organic, which are captured in the law. The on-the-ground efforts



to embrace organic in lawn care reinforces consumer demand for organic. Please visit our *Save our Organic* (<http://bit.ly/SaveOurOrganic>) webpage and make your voice heard to demand that organic thrives with integrity.

Jay Feldman is executive director of Beyond Pesticides.