



An SFMANJ Member's Prepared Testimony Concerning New Jersey's Proposed "Safe Playing Fields Act"

The following was prepared and read by Rich Watson, Grounds Supervisor, Pine Hill Public Schools and SFMANJ Board of Directors, at the New Jersey State Assembly Environmental and Solid Waste Committee Hearing in Trenton, NJ on Thursday, February 10, 2011.

Good afternoon ladies and gentleman.

My name is Rich Watson. I am the Grounds Supervisor for the Pine Hill School District in Southern New Jersey. It is a privilege for me to be here. The issue of safe playing fields is an important issue to all of us here today. It is important to me because I have three daughters, two of which play sports. One daughter plays on fields that have little or no maintenance performed on them, while the other plays on well maintained fields. Both sites are considered sports fields. One is safe the other is not. The unsafe field is at a local school and it amazes me that they let kids play on it. The other field is a municipal field. It is well maintained and plays great. This is where the real safety issues on sports fields are. Pesticides didn't cause one field to be unsafe and the other safe. They are a small part of a complete turf program that is the key to safe fields.

I am here today to talk about our sports turf program in Pine Hill. If you pull up to any of our buildings you will be disappointed in the condition of our grass. These lawns are covered with weeds and crabgrass. We as a district are ok with that. Our kids who compete in athletics or take part in gym class play on well maintained natural turf playing surfaces. Together we have decided to put our focus where the kids actually play and compete. We have a 40 year old facility that is in need of cosmetic attention, but we have some of the best playing fields in NJ. So, how did we do it?

The development of a Sports Turf IPM program took shape. We have taken the guidelines set up by the School IPM Law and fit our sports turf program inside. It was not easy at first. I struggled with the additional notifications and had doubts about if it would work at all. It took a lot of hard work, but over time we developed a program that not only worked, it exceeded my expectations. Here is how we did it.

The first thing was to develop a field history for each individual field. Then problem areas were identified and pest thresholds were set. Next, we took a look at what had been done in the past to determine what worked and what needed to be changed. What we discovered was that cultural practices are the backbone of our turf program. They include: Mowing frequency/

mowing height, aeration, fertility with soil testing, seeding during our sports seasons, and proper irrigation. These are the building blocks for our fields.

I know by now you are wondering how we deal with pest issues. In a school district costs are always a concern. Our supply budget has been cut and most likely will not be going up any time soon. The cost for our pest control on our athletic fields this year was \$1,425. That included three granular applications and two spray applications. Just for the record, one application was made during Spring break with notification and the others were all made during the summer also with notification. No children were on the property at the time of applications and fields were closed until the re-entry period had expired. All applications were made because the pest threshold set in our IPM program had been exceeded. Before these applications were made, we considered other low-impact /biological options. I understand there is a lot of talk about alternatives to chemical lawn management that work and are cost effective. I don't think we are there yet. I think we need to compare apples to apples. Corn gluten for example, is an accepted organic weed control product. Corn gluten costs \$29.95 per bag and covers 1,000 square ft. (at the lowest rate) The average football field is 66,000 square ft. In order to apply pre-emergent weed control for this field, it will cost \$1,976.70 for 66 bags. That is one application on one field at the products lowest rate. That is not cost effective in my book.

Nematodes have been suggested to replace insecticides. I have never used them, but I understand that they are difficult to work with, since they are a living organism. The cost for nematodes is \$200 per acre plus shipping. Compared to Merit at less than \$100 per acre, there really is no cost comparison. If I believed that nematodes would work in large scale applications, I would consider trying them. However, the cost and Dr. Koppenhoffer of Rutgers recommendation that they are not a good choice for sports fields has steered me away from them. I am not against any of these or other organic products. I just don't feel at this time with the current budget crisis and lack of unbiased research, we can use these products. Hopefully in the future the cost will come down in price and there will be a realistic way to use them in large scale applications.

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Dr. Henry W. Indyk
Graduate Fellowship
in
Turfgrass Science

As many of you know, the turfgrass industry lost a dear friend and colleague in September 2005. We will all miss Henry very much and would like to insure that his legacy lives on. The Indyk family would like to establish a memorial fellowship to support graduate students interested in applied turfgrass science. This fellowship is being created to help assure that tomorrow's graduate students have the financial resources to get an advanced degree in turfgrass science at Rutgers University. To fund a full graduate assistantship each year in Henry's name, we will need to raise a total of \$400,000. Your generous support at this time will bring us closer to reaching this goal.

To make a tax-deductible contribution today, please send a check payable to the Rutgers University Foundation, 7 College Avenue, New Brunswick, NJ 08901. Be sure to indicate "Indyk Fellowship, Turfgrass" in the memo portion of your check. If you desire, you may provide a donation in the form of a pledge payable over several years.

For information on other ways to support this fellowship, please contact

Dr. Bruce B. Clarke, Director – Rutgers Center for Turfgrass Science
 (732) 932-9400, ext. 331; or clarke@aesop.rutgers.edu or

John Pearson, Director of Leadership Gifts at the Foundation, by calling
 (732) 932-7899 or email: pearson@winants.rutgers.edu



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The bottom line is we run a well rounded turf program in Pine Hill. It is not a pesticide program. The charge that schools are needlessly using lawn pesticides does not apply in our district. Synthetic pesticides are a very small part of our sports turf program. They are the last line of defense for the sports turf manager to keep their fields safe for the children using them. I know that weeds, insects, and fungi are not threats to human life. But, left unchecked they can be a considerable safety risk to the very children that are being protected by this proposed legislation.

I have been maintaining the athletic fields at Overbrook High School for over 20 years now. In 2009 the Philadelphia Inquirer named our football field "The Best in South Jersey". I am very proud of the progress that we have made. Our IPM program has worked so well that the Borough of Pine Hill has enlisted our help in turning around their municipal fields. This is not because

of our pesticide program, but rather because the mayor and council trust our judgment and respect our work. We in return, want to bring safe playing fields to the youngest athletes in Pine Hill also.

In closing, I would like to thank the committee again for allowing me to give you a hands on look at what is going on in sports turf management. Safe playing fields should be the goal for everyone. It is my hope that there can be some common ground found in regards to the judicious use of pesticides on sports fields. At this time I don't think the Safe Playing Fields Act will make our playing fields safer. Right now in NJ, there are many school and municipal fields in desperate need of renovation. I don't want to see more join this list. Please think carefully before considering this legislation.

*Rich Watson is Grounds Supervisor, Pine Hill Public Schools;
 and a Member of the SFMANJ Board of Directors.*