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RESEARCH

Do lawn chemicals contaminate our water?

Not much concrete evidence exists for blaming lawn care chemicals for water contamination. Penn State professor of turfgrass science Thomas Watschke is studying claims which link associate nutrients and pesticides applied to lawns with the decline of water quality.

"There is very little literature about lawns. Most data are from pasture hydrology studies. Yet a pasture is not comparable to a lawn," Watschke explains. "A lawn does not suffer the same degree of compaction or severe defoliation from grazing activity. The closest we come to that is using a lawn mower with a grass catcher."

The study has shown that differences in turf establishment methods affect runoff. Sodded plots have 15 times less runoff than seeded plots four months after establishment.

The data shows that 1,300 sq. ft. of sodded, sloped lawn, thick and green without soil patches showing through, will give off approximately 1/2-gallon per minute runoff during a peak rainfall.

On less dense, unattractive grass with bare areas separating clumps, up to 7 1/2-gallons per minute can escape during the peak.

"It appears that plant density and thatch contribute significantly to decreased runoff," Watschke says. The thicker the turf, the better its ability to decrease water movement and the greater its ability to remove nutrients and pesticides which have been applied.

Herbicides were applied to the test lawns last fall. Runoff water has been collected regularly and is currently frozen until it can be analyzed by the University's Pesticide Research Lab.

Watschke says the next step will be to add commercially-available pesticides and nutrients to study their effects. "This will finally put the cart before the horse," he says. "It will tell us what we don't know about what has already happened and is happening."

LEGISLATION

Federal government coming down hard on pesticide use

The EPA and the Government Accounting Office are trying to make it more difficult for commercial pesticide applicators to do business.

A proposed amendment to the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA), is being re-