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NYS IPM School Pesticide Survey Points to Successes, Gaps

by Mary Woodsen

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GENEVA, NY: Is spraying pesticides a routine chore in New York's public schools? And what are the pests they might be trying to control?

A survey released in June 2002, "Pest Management Practices: A Survey of Public School Districts in New York State," answers these questions and more.

The survey was conducted by the New York State Integrated Pest Management (NYS IPM) Program in 2001. The program researches, tests, and teaches methods of pest control that pose the least risk to human health and the environment.

Working with the New York State Department of Health and the New York State Education Department, Lynn Braband, an educator for the NYS IPM Program, sent surveys to all 703 public school districts in the state.

"We wanted to get a general picture of pest management in New York's schools and gather baseline data for the future," says Braband. "We'll use this information to measure our impact, track improvements, and fine-tune our training and research work"

Eighty percent of the districts responded, representing 55 counties. Most commonly, superintendents of buildings and grounds completed the survey. When asked whether the school district performs regularly scheduled pesticide applications inside buildings, 69 percent of respondents said no, while 81 percent of schools don't perform regularly scheduled sprays on their lawns. Most applications are made after hours or on weekends or holidays.

"It's heartening to see that two-thirds of school districts avoid routine pesticide applications in our schools," says Jennifer Grant, Coordinator, NYS Community IPM Program.

To help combat indoor pests, 80 percent of school districts inspect for them. And 90 percent keep school buildings and grounds clean and tidy as the first line of defense.

On the other hand, in two thirds of districts, employees receive 10 or fewer hours of training

in pest management each year. And fewer than 30 percent train and encourage teachers, students, and staff to participate in school pest management programs.

Pest management committees and written policies provide a strong backbone for least-toxic pest control. Yet only about one quarter of responding districts have a pest management advisory committee. About half of urban and suburban schools have a written pest management policy-and of rural schools, only 40 percent have a written policy.

As for the pests themselves-ants, bees, mice, weeds, and flies are the top five. Is there an upstate/downstate split? Yes. Upstate schools are more likely to be pestered by flies and lice. Grubs, cockroaches, termites-and especially geese-are among dominant pests in downstate schools. Districts spend a yearly average of \$4,300 to deal with pests. Statewide, the tally is well over \$3 million.

"We found that there's a wide range of pest issues in different areas of the state," says Laura Sahr, Emergency Planning Liaison at Office of Facilities Planning, NYS Education Department. "That means there's no one-size-fits-all solution to pest problems in our schools."

Sahr sits on the newly formed Statewide School IPM Committee, which will help schools develop and promote IPM. "The education community-parents, teachers, administrators, and students-have an increasing awareness of the importance of IPM," she says. "We plan to keep it that way."

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