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Suffolk County pesticide phase-out committee wins IPM award

by Mary Woodsen

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ITHACA, NY: Mice in the concession stands, ants in the archives, poison ivy clambering over the park fence -- Suffolk County's Community Advisory Committee has seen it all. The county, which owns or leases 356 buildings and thousands of acres of parks, beaches and golf courses, deals with problems like these every day.

Without pesticides.

Now, for their careful and innovative work on pesticide problems big and small, the Community Advisory Committee has been honored with an "Excellence in IPM Award" from the New York State Integrated Pest Management (IPM) Program. IPM is a set of practices that minimizes the use of pesticides while promoting environmental health.

In 1996, Suffolk County voted to phase out pesticide use on all county property. Public anxiety about possible links between pesticide use and cancer rates fueled the phaseout. The law called for scaling back pesticide use starting in 2000, with a complete ban, except in matters of public health and safety, by 2002.

The Community Advisory Committee -- nine people from county agencies and the community -- is leading the charge. They're dealing with properties ranging from nursing homes and jails to museums and office buildings -- and even a working farm with a slaughterhouse. Ten thousand employees and 1.3 million residents work, and do business, and play in county properties nearly every day.

"This is an eager, committed, can-do group," says County Legislator Dave Bishop, who originally proposed the ban. "They've had to deal with problems that no one anticipated when we began. But they do research, bring in experts, and look at the alternatives. They see issues through to the end."

Exempting the Law

Sometimes that involves granting exemptions to the law. County corrections officers, with

over 1,500 inmates to deal with, came before the committee and explained how they treat for body lice in the jail. "They have to protect inmates and officers alike from lice," says Amy Juchatz, the committee's chair and the health program analyst at the Suffolk County Department of Health Services. "In that kind of setting, there aren't feasible alternatives to insecticide-based treatments, so we asked the legislature to make an exception."

Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County has lent their expertise. When the Community Advisory Committee realized that there were pesticides in the antifouling paints used to keep barnacles and algae from glomming onto boat bottoms, they turned to Suffolk Extension's IPM specialist, Joyce Rodler, and NYS IPM Program staff for alternatives.

"We're researching alternatives ranging from power-washing to 'marine skin,' a paintable plastic that things won't stick to," says Rodler. "The county operates everything from police patrol boats and tugboats to a 60-ton dredge, so we'll probably need several options."

The Buzz About Mosquitoes

With mosquitoes much on peoples' minds, Dominick Ninivaggi, superintendent of the Department of Public Works' Vector Control unit, is looking at alternatives to sprays. "Public health is number one," says Ninivaggi, "The law exempts any product used to protect people from diseases like West Nile virus." But he is investigating how bacteria, growth regulators, garlic oil repellants, and larvae-killing sound waves could work for large-scale mosquito control.

Suffolk County has been using bacterial products to control mosquito larvae since 1982, and has been steadily reducing its reliance on broad-spectrum pesticides since 1995.

Of 43 species of mosquito found in Suffolk County, three imported species found in saltwater marshes are among the handful of aggressive species that transmit West Nile virus. Thousands of acres of fresh- and saltwater marshes lie within the county's bounds. Ninivaggi is researching how wetlands restoration can keep mosquitoes down while reducing pesticide use. "We're working to manage water levels so fish can get in there and eat the mosquito larvae," says Ninivaggi.

Jennifer Grant, who coordinates programs in community IPM for the NYS IPM Program, presented the award on January 15 in Yaphank at the monthly meeting of the Suffolk County Community Advisory Committee. "This committee looks at the law, then researches the nitty-gritty details of how to make it work," says Grant. "They're an ideal model for how communities can approach controversial issues involving pesticides."

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