

Colorado's turf wars over pesticide use trigger fears of total ban

By Colleen O'Connor *The Denver Post* *The Denver Post*
Posted:

DenverPost.com

Turf wars are flaring in Colorado, pitting people who prize pristine, weed-free lawns against those who want an organic, chemical-free lifestyle.

The battle is so pitched that local lawn-and-garden pros fear that a Canadian-style ban on pesticides and herbicides looms and they'll be left without a powerful tool to fight landscape-decimating pests and weeds.

The American Academy of Pediatrics added fuel to the fire last month with a policy statement that linked prenatal and early-childhood exposure to chemical pesticides with pediatric cancers, decreased cognitive function and behavioral problems.

"It's one of the most contentious issues you can ever imagine," said Paul Tukey, founder of SafeLawns, an advocacy organization for natural lawn care.

In Colorado, municipalities — including Boulder and Durango — have changed policies in response to residents worried about health consequences of synthetic pesticides. They're focused on eliminating chemical controls of weeds and insects in public parks and playgrounds, and proponents say such programs prove there are ways to both protect health and keep landscapes lovely.

The University of Colorado doesn't use chemicals to treat turf in its open spaces or fields. Compost tea is used to fertilize, and weeds are hand-pulled.

Outdoor-services manager Don Inglis said the change was made in response to students wondering "why we were using herbicides on campus when we are one of the leaders in the green industry, from the university standpoint."

The city of Boulder, considered a national leader in integrated pest management, is launching a program that will designate some city-owned parks and open space as pesticide-free.

"We've learned that turf is manageable without pesticides, but it does take time and effort," said Rella Abernathy, the city's integrated-pest-management coordinator.

The new program formalizes one that has been in use for a decade to manage about 650 acres of turf in parks and along greenways, the Pearl Street Mall and the Municipal Complex. There are six city parks where only organic fertilizer is used.

Playing fields at Stazio, Pleasant View and East Mapleton parks are proof of how effective the program is, Abernathy said.

"Some good examples are our tournament-level ball fields, which we think are as good as any on the Front Range," she said.

The city also has used manual cultivation, mostly by volunteers, to control the spread of [the noxious](#)

[weed Mediterranean sage](#) on city open space. The weed, required by state law to be eradicated, is widespread over 20,000 acres in Boulder County.

Durango tries partial ban

In Durango, after parents worried about their kids' health packed city meetings demanding change, the city is experimenting with a partial ban of chemical pesticides.

The council voted unanimously against a total ban of synthetic pesticides but then worked out a compromise that in September created the Organically Managed Lands Program. Nine city parks fall under the program, including neighborhood parks, greenway parks, elementary-school playgrounds and athletic fields.

The goal is to have the pilot program launched this spring.

Last summer in Superior, a local resident sparked dialogue about a total ban on synthetic pesticides from common areas and greenways, but city officials were not convinced.

Parks managers estimated going organic on the green space would be two or three times more expensive, said Jim Paine, Parks, Recreation, Open Space and Trails Advisory Committee chairman.

"Organics are tricky to use and not as reliable," he said. "You have to know what you're doing and make a long-term commitment. If the quality of the parkland lawns and natural open space begins to deteriorate, you've got a problem, and it's very expensive to rectify once you start down that road."

Many people on this side of the debate point to Ontario, Canada, which since [Earth Day 2009 has banned the use of synthetic chemicals](#) for cosmetic control of weeds and pests in landscaping.

The ban has so frustrated some people that they head over the border to buy such products as Roundup weed- and-grass killer in U.S. stores.

"In cities along the border, you see that herbicide is in use, especially in the springtime, because people still want nice lawns," said Chris Lemcke, technical coordinator at Weed Man USA, who lives in Oshawa, Ontario.

Canada's toughest ban is in Ontario, but [Quebec started the trend in 2003 with its ban on lawn pesticides, according to the David Suzuki Foundation](#). New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island also have restrictions on the cosmetic use of synthetic pesticides.

In Ontario, Lemcke said, hundreds of trees have died from blight because they can't be protected using synthetic chemical controls.

"Our parks are disgusting," he said by phone from his office. "There are a few areas where they spend more money on organics, and they're trying to keep the playing fields pretty decent. But other parks, like where you take dogs for a walk, are all weeds. There is no grass left. It's a sea of yellow in the springtime."

Protecting urban forest

In Colorado, fears of a total ban prompt some to worry about trees.

"It would devastate the urban forest and landscape," said Kristen Fefes, executive director of the Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado.

The continuing drought could lead to water restrictions, she said, and stressed trees are more susceptible to pests, just as [the 2001 drought fueled an outbreak of mountain pine beetles](#).

"If you use pesticides wisely, and according to the principles of integrated pest management, they are safe," she said.

But there are Coloradans like former Aspen Mayor Bill Stirling who would support a total ban on pesticides, with rare exceptions for severe problems such as pine-beetle infestations.

"We need to get beyond pesticides and make them against the law," he said.

Stirling has joined with other Aspenites in a plan to lobby their state representatives on the issue of pesticides.

"When I was mayor, we eliminated smoking in town and proposed a ban on the sale of furs," he said. "Some of the things we did, like with historic preservation, were very radical. All those things in the long run benefited our community."

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