Defining and Managing Invasives in an Ecological Context

This year’s 36th National Pesticides Forum, Organic
Neighborhoods: For healthy children, families, and
economy, reaffirms the value of bringing people together
to share the latest science, policies, and practices to protect
our communities from toxic pesticide use. We take a positive
approach in showcasing the opportunities to adopt organic
practices that eliminate the need for toxic chemicals. Change
is emanating from communities and businesses across the
country because federal and, too often, state governments
are not functioning as they should for the common good.

Pesticide Use in the Name of Invasives
There are many factors that drive pesticide use and pesticide
dependency. One that stands out is the stated need to kill,
control, or manage invasive species. This issue of Pesticides
and You explores an ecological approach to the management
of unwanted species in the context of biological systems that
are integral to sustaining life.

While the most common definition of invasive includes the
term “non-native” accompanied by concepts of harm to
the environment, natural habitat, human health, and the
economy, the “invasives” are not typically defined in the con-
text of intact or healthy ecosystems. So, a non-native species
emerges on the landscape, is aggressive because it is filling
a niche (an area that is stressed or vulnerable to infestation),
and it begins to take over.

The scenario is common and viewed as justification for
pesticide use that would otherwise be deemed unacceptable
by public health and environmental standards. Therefore, we
see the fever pitched response to invasives at the federal level
with the issuance of Executive Order 13112 in February, 1999
—requiring executive departments and agencies “to take steps
to prevent the introduction and spread of invasive species, and
to support efforts to eradicate and control invasive species
that are established” under the direction of the National
Invasive Species Council. The Council was set up to oversee
implementation of the order and encourage proactive plan-
ning and action to “improve the Federal response to invasive
species.” Under the federal Plant Protection Act, USDA’s
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is autho-
rized to “take both emergency and extraordinary emergency
actions to address invasions of noxious [invasive] weeds.”
This has translated to heavy pesticide use.

The list of invasive species is very long. It can be found on
the USDA National Invasive Species Information Center’s
webpage. Species from these lists have been incorporated
into state laws requiring landowners to take action to
control them. Local governments often exempt invasives
from ordinances restricting pesticides in parks and on playing
fields. Government funds are available for weed manage-
ment entities to carry out eradication efforts. In this issue, we
discuss an approach to invasives, starting with a clear defini-
tion of the problem, evaluation of the conditions that give rise
to the problem, and a strategy to address the underlying
causes.

Court Stops CA Invasive Spray Program
We write about a landmark court decision in California,
which recently found that the state has not performed
adequate reviews of pesticides used to kill invasives under
the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The court
shut down the aggressive spray program in the state until it
conducts adequate reviews of the health impacts and possible
alternative strategies. We include our factsheet on the most
widely used herbicide, Monsanto’s Roundup (glyphosate),
in the campaign to kill invasives because of the danger
it poses.

Real Organic
As the adverse effects of pesticides mount and organic
alternatives take hold, USDA and members of Congress are
attacking organic and the underlying standards that have
supported exponential growth of organic agricultural pro-
duction. The governing principles and values integral to the
federal Organic Foods Production Act are in need of protec-
tion. It is critical that the farmer and consumer base that has
driven organic vociferously protects the foundation of organic
integrity. To that end, we have joined the standards board of
The Real Organic Project, a collaboration that brings together
the organic community to define those standards that are
not being upheld by USDA, but are adopted by farmers who
will display an add-on label on their certified organic products.
This real organic label, which will roll out over the next year,
will enable consumers to identify those products that truly
meet the standards of the organic law, such as growing
food in biologically active regenerative soil as opposed to a
hydroponic water solution. Through this process, consumers
and farmers together are embracing organic as it is intended
to be by law, advancing organic market growth.

There is reason for optimism when groups of dedicated
people join together to protect health and the environment.
This is happening in communities nationwide and will continue in the marketplace, as
people define the standards and practices
that protect life.

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