



## Lawns for Lobsters

Kennebunkport, Maine

### Home Rules, Home Tools: Locally Led Conservation Achievements

Although Kennebunkport is one of Maine's best-known summer resort communities, it is also a community in which a significant number of residents earn their living from the sea, particularly from lobster fishing. Several of those lobstermen, including one who also serves as a Selectman, were becoming increasingly concerned about apparent contamination of the waters they fished. The Kennebunkport Conservation Commission (KCC) built on this concern to create a comprehensive, town-wide initiative designed to reduce chemical runoff in area streams, rivers and coastal waters.

Water quality has been a concern of the commission for a number of years. In addition to participating in ongoing water testing for *E. coli* and phytoplankton concentrations, the KCC has also sponsored a wide variety of public informational sessions on topics as diverse as organic gardening, the Yardscaping program and the proper care and maintenance of septic systems. And while these sessions were often well attended, commission members didn't feel they were resulting in the kind of collective impact they had hoped for, particularly regarding fertilizer and pesticide runoff from lawns and gardens in town. Given the lobstermen's interest, they decided to focus intensively on this issue.

With that decision made, Commission members began a thorough investigation of the whole chemical contamination / water quality issue. Gary Fish, Director of the Maine Board of Pesticide Control, was particularly helpful in linking them to groups with information on that subject and his office subsequently became a highly valued partner in every phase of this project. As part of their exploration, the commission also invited several lobstermen, representatives from the Maine Lobstermen's Association and organic and non-organic lawn care professionals to attend their meetings to discuss the issue.

With facts in hand, the commission then set out to design their voluntary, town-wide

approach to educating people about proper fertilizer and pesticide use. They deliberately avoided taking the town ordinance route, feeling that in the end they would get more support from the community through a grassroots educational/awareness campaign.

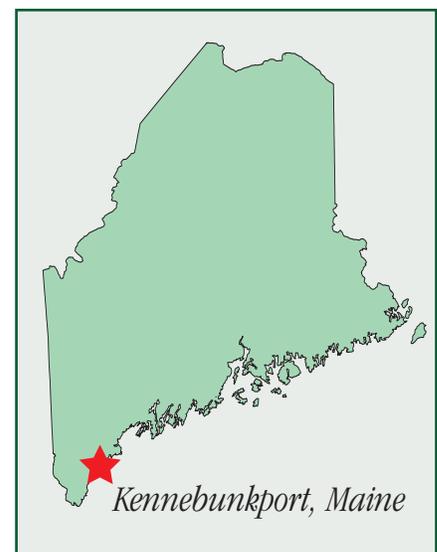
The first step in that process was to get the town to formally adopt a set of Best Management Practices [BMPs] for the Application of Turf Fertilizers and Pesticides developed under the auspices of the Maine Board of Pesticides. Their intent was to get official town endorsement of their work early on in the project, and full participation by the town in implementing recommended practices on town properties. An order to that effect was approved by a unanimous vote of the Selectmen in November 2008. With the enthusiastic support of Town Manager Larry Mead and the Planning Board, the town is now implementing those practices.

*"I believe that the most practical approach to reducing the use of harmful chemicals on residential lawns is through education and motivation, not regulation. People are just more likely to respond positively to a compelling story that they can relate to. Linking lawn care to the viability of the lobster catch was not just a catchy title, it was a concept that people in Kennebunkport could understand and respond to. Our residents want our local lobstermen to thrive. They and their industry are an intrinsic part of the town's character. Making the link between lawns and lobsters helped to grab the attention of residents and made it easier to educate them on healthy lawn care practices."*

—Larry Mead, Town Manager

Next, the Commission sent a letter on town stationery to all the lawn care providers that they could identify who worked in Kennebunkport. They enclosed a copy of the BMPs with a cover letter explaining the reasons they were promoting them. They also let the providers know that if they were willing to follow the BMPs [if asked by a customer], their business names would be listed on the town website as a Lawns for Lobsters partner.

This has proven quite successful, with seven such providers now on that list. Overall, cooperation from lawn care companies, both organic and non-organic, has been very high, and one company has become a particularly strong and effective advocate of the program. The next challenge was to "market" the program to the community. In May 2009, the commission got a two-page spread in the annual town newsletter, a publication seen by both year-round and summer residents, explaining the reasons behind their actions and asking them to follow the BMPs [by now they had distilled those BMPs into ten user friendly steps]. The article also included a list of questions they suggested residents ask any lawn care provider that they might employ.



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[These questions and the revised BMPs were vetted through the ever-helpful Maine Board of Pesticide Control.]

*“The Lawns for Lobsters project has been a great success. I have been assisting the town of Kennebunkport’s Conservation Commission help educate homeowners on the effects of what harsh chemicals can do to our waters. The response has been very positive from all homeowners who want a lush green lawn, but don’t want to use the chemicals that some companies are customarily using. During the past six months we have converted several customers from chemical treatments to organic treatments. The Commission has done a tremendous job in preparing the information that is available……. In the long run, this is a win-win situation.”*

**—Dan Viebmann, owner, Dan Viebmann Landscaping**

During this process, the KCC worked for several months with an environmental studies class taught at the University of New England. Students met with lobstermen, Gary Fish, the Maine Lobstermen’s Association and others, and did substantial additional research. The result was a presentation by the class at a well-attended community forum explaining their findings and the importance of the BMPs. The class explained the steps than homeowners can take to ensure a healthy lawn, why questions should be asked of landscapers before embarking on a lawn care program, and how negative impacts can be reduced while still having a green and attractive lawn. They also developed a concise, attractive brochure that the KCC is using as a handout.

To gain visibility, the commission took the *Lawns for Lobsters* theme and had car decals printed, with a logo of a lobster holding a shovel and the words “Lawns for Lobsters” and “Fewer Chemicals, Cleaner Water” surrounding it. They also turned these stickers into small lawn signs, similar in size to the “horrid chemicals applied here” signs which

are mandatory when toxic chemicals are used on a lawn. The signs can be found on the lawns of all town buildings (town hall, library, police station, etc.), and on the lawns of people who have adopted the tenets of the *Lawns for Lobsters* program, and the stickers are popping up on cars and trucks - including those of some of the lobstermen - around town.



According to former KCC chair and the leader of this initiative, Nancy Kling, “We are very encouraged by the response to our *Lawns for Lobsters* program. The idea that a great looking lawn can be a healthy one for our families and for the environment is taking hold. We’ll gear up again in the early spring next year, to provide more education.”

Like all change efforts, *Lawns for Lobsters* will take several years to really take root, but it’s well on its way to changing the way people think about pesticide and fertilizer application in Kennebunkport.

### LESSONS LEARNED

- Don’t alienate anyone. Our primary resistance came from lawn care companies who are responsible for caring for the lawns of seasonal residents, who want the “perfect lawn” for the few weeks that they are here. We had several conversations with people from companies who thought we were trying to hurt their businesses. After talking to them, usually for quite a while, we could generally agree that this should be looked at as an opportunity, and that we were actually trying to give them the chance to participate.
- Peer pressure seems to be a very effective tool. Having our signs on lawns has led to questions about what they represent and what it takes to get involved.
- There still is a great need for more education - lots of people don’t know what the impact of chemicals actually is, and how to avoid it. Persevere.
- You do get people stepping up when you don’t expect it. We’ve been contacted by people from condo associations wanting to follow the program, from a woman who wanted packets of information to put in her chemical-using neighbors’ mailboxes, and from a man whose house was on a garden tour and who wanted us there to pass out information.

**For more information, please visit:**

[http://www.kennebunkportme.gov/  
Public\\_Documents/Kennebunkport  
ME\\_BComm/conservation](http://www.kennebunkportme.gov/Public_Documents/Kennebunkport_ME_BComm/conservation)

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